

3. Annexed hereto as **Exhibit A** is a true and correct copy of the novel *The Art of Fielding*, written by Defendant. As *The Art of Fielding* is a bound book, it will be filed and served under separate cover.

4. Annexed hereto as **Exhibit B** is a true and correct copy of the novel *Bucky's 9th*, written by Plaintiff and provided to counsel for Defendant by Plaintiff's counsel on October 4, 2017.

I declare under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct.

Dated: New York, New York
November 10, 2017

/s/ Elizabeth A. McNamara
ELIZABETH A. McNAMARA

Exhibit A

Paperback edition of *The Art of Fielding* by Chad Harbach

[Filed Under Separate Cover]

Exhibit B

Part I

Step Right Up

Chapter 1

If you ever wake up at 5pm on your birthday with a quarter, two nickels, and a mosaic of potato chips stuck to your back and shoulders, tell me you don't believe -- if only for the instant you grip the side rails of your cot and raise yourself up -- that the flashing light is coming from candles, fireworks, or the end of a tunnel -- not from the downstairs' bar's pink neon sign fizzling outside your window. Tell me you don't ooze back down into the rut of the mattress, and try again.

Perhaps you claw at a fissure in the wall to launch yourself into a cross-legged hunch. Arching your broad back, you lower your heavy legs over the side and wrestle for some control of the situation, timing your breaths with the intermittent flashes of neon, so that the rose-patterned wallpaper blooms pink when you inhale and wilts under your exhales. But soon the Friday afterwork crowd claims the downstairs bar. The music shakes your cozy confines, and the little sink's faucet drips out a storm.

The evening smells of armpits or worse.

When *I* got here four days ago, given the hot streak I was on, I'd decided it was bad luck to ever let both feet hit the floor until I'd identified which jukebox selection was able to do what I hope to accomplish again one day on my own -- make my bedsprings squeak. I yawn, "Satisfaction. The Stones," and am free to slide my long toes between the floor's flip-flopping chips of linoleum.

As gullible as I know I can be, I still have a hard time believing that not so long ago speculation about this very room -- a berth just bigger than a basketcase over one of the city's anonymous watering holes -- rejuvenated several sports gossips' careers and sent fans scrambling on pilgrimages to find it.

So, while stretching my neck and shoulders into my clothes, I have to wonder how long *my* tour of this place will last. How many times will Keith Richards's strung-out guitar whack me on the head before this flop – once of legendary proportion – (that seems to have stopped mattering to anyone but me) is out of my system forever?

At the bottom of the stairs, I two-handedly tug my sweatshirt over my gut, watch it slowly curl back, and finally just go through the bar with the fabric stretched down in both fists.

Only the waitress senses my frustrated scowl and anticipating my question doesn't look up from pouring a draft. "Still haven't seen him, Babe," she says.

The Italian Ices vendor at the corner of 4th and Pine hasn't either. Nor have the furry-slippered grannies watering their concrete gardens up and down Spruce, nor the geezers flocking in the dusk outside the VFW.

Zigging through the neighborhood, I come across a liquor store. Surprisingly I don't know the place and more surprisingly I find a few worn singles in my wallet tucked around the circa 1990 Topps football card. I smooth the card on my blue jeans and go in.

"Excuse me. I was hoping you could tell me—"

The proprietor uncrouches from restocking cheap champagne to hold the card back from his face and take a look. "Willie Chance. Sucker could shake the devil. But not the law I guess." Smudging a thumbprint off the pictured athlete's shaved head he wonders aloud, "What's he been out – four years?"

"Three-ish," I say.

"Heard he lives around here," the man says as he looks over my grease-spattered sweatshirt and jeans. "Not that I'd know," he mutters defensively. "Best to let lying dogs sleep."

Maybe the dude's got a point. Because I'm feeling like I just got a free pass from a test I fear I'll never be ready to take. It'd be great to enjoy this delay – like a rainout, but I know this temporary reprieve will only lead to limbo and then to restless sweats as I wait for morning to come. Not that the last three-ish years have been a total waste. Plenty has happened since that spring day of such promise when Willie Chance quietly returned to society and I ditched the 9th inning of the most important game of my life, putting my freshman year and all else I'd ever known in the rearview.

Except the peach schnapps, of course.

Squinting constipatedly at the liquor bottles' labels, I can see myself back there, behind the dugout, pretending to hold my dong in a stall of the men's bathroom, when I was actually slipping my spikes into my glove, and then speeding to the cabin in the hills – a few innings too late – and at nightfall setting out for the Arctic Circle. Funds were slim to begin with. And soon after crossing the Ohio (where I realized how good water tastes when you're thirsty), I got into pioneer mode, bathing in rainshowers and leveraging any and all resources. For example (though every time I felt like I was auditioning for the role of circus clown), I discovered that swinging dad's #12 pendant and gold chain like a hypnotist's charm could help with a tank of gas, a side of beans, or a soft place to sleep. Roaming farther from civilization, my red-nosed embarrassment perversely turned to guilty pleasure when the hunk of gold and glitter was lucky to collect more than the occasional, "Who, now?" So I wound up settling in Saskatoon and hooking on with an outfit called Sasquatch Safaris. The experience imparted little more than patience. Not much later, I was drilling holes into bowling balls in Salt Lake. From Hialeah to Tupelo, I tore up the country, smiling my way through every maggot job in between. Outrage eventually prevails. It clocked me during a stint as the Dove Bar Guy at St. Paul Saints games,

when I lifted my head long enough to discern I was breathing the same air as strutting semi-pros I could run circles around. Thereon at home games, once the fans had left the stadium, I'd race barefoot in the outfield grass, hoping that somewhere out there I might find the one thing my mid-section seemed to lack, the guts to return to Philadelphia and do what I was purportedly doing now: tracking down Willie Chance.

I thank the liquor store owner and turn right into the dark on warehouse row.

I've taken segments of the warehouse route to work every night since getting into town on Monday. The creeping river rot and carbon emissions no longer dizzy the senses, but tonight's intensifying shimmer on the half-paved trolley lines is a stunner. And since I'm not the type to let something like gainful employment interfere with something like procrastination, I follow the squiggling rails between piers, storage facilities, and depots. With each gleaming curve in the road, my impatience to find the source of the strange light grows. The breeze created by forward motion cools my face, and seems to also carry the melodious whistles of a pipe organ.

Most people who run in this part of town would be running for their lives. Not your boy. I settle into a dogged pace that even I have to admit is more lumber than sprint. But rounding another corner into a long alley, I spot what appears to be that rarest of treasures – third base – flickering ahead, unattended, and so I imagine the outfielders have all fallen down, so my taking it is just possible. Will I get there? I mean before my side splits wide or my aorta explodes? I'm beginning to feel like I've been chasing this peephole in the night since my last birthday. My stomach jiggles with dread as the back alley shadow suddenly transitions to the luminous old river road, asparkle beneath a brilliant oval in the lower sky that pulsates like the halo over Veterans Stadium. (But wait. This is the post-Super Bowl pre-Opening Day lull. And The Vet's got to be behind me.)

My eyes adjust and now I see that down the embankment, where the Schuylkill flows into the Delaware, a glittery Ferris wheel is churning at the pace of the current. Around it sprawls a roadshow, obviously broken down several hundred miles north of someplace better. Why else park its elephant, rusty rides, and arcade on the least amazing spot in Philadelphia: an ice-hard mound flattening from roadway to water's edge, bordered by a natural gas terminal and a sewage treatment plant?

Chinese lanterns are being strung across a wire grid. The hastily erected food and fun tents lean downstream toward the Delaware's bend, leaving little doubt all merriment will soon decamp to warmer climes. Still, this evening – the first of March – is temperate, with the calliope playing breezy summer tunes. In twos and fours, people mill about. A man in office clothes and a boy around 9 ask me to take their picture. After a couple clicks, I hand the camera back and watch the father and son drift down the slope into the gauntlet of games. It seems the farther ahead they go, the farther in reverse I'm thrown. Borne on the wings of Crazy Mouse – I hate rides, P.S. – back down that alley and the squiggly tracks, over the city, up Route 76 to as good a starting point as any: the county fair, 1988. A lollapalooza at the time, but in retrospect, a rinky-dink scene ala what we have here. But we made all the stops, the NFL's leading passer and I, ending up in a tent where you waited your turn to heave miniature baseballs at wooden Philadelphia Phillies bobble-head dolls evenly-spaced on a pyramid of shelves. The prize for decking the highest one under the tent's pointed canvas ceiling was, incongruously, an official NFL football.

Those days, I aimed high.

The harder I threw, the harder each ball broke away from the grinning bobble-heads. Infuriating. At the time the only thing I seemed capable of pitching was my 10-year-old version of a shit-fit. Customers were noisily packing in, the whole tent rowdy to see everybody's favorite idol try his luck. So I surrendered the pill to my pop. And the rest, as they say, was history. Dad tried softening the blow by saying the football was 'official' but not regulation, and I seized on that to swap the coveted pigskin to the carnie for one of the undersized, unbalanced baseballs.

For years I winged it at the plum tree in the yard, often to window-shattering acclaim. And by the time I was a teenager, I'd mastered the calculus of distance-over-armspeed and the art of curving the ball away from the neighbor's dormers. Then one early spring day like this one, after plunking all the unripe fruit off the highest limbs, I was ready to take the legendary Thunder Bucks at the ball toss. But we never got back to the fair.

I blow my lungs clear at the smokestacks and cake-shaped storage tanks west of the river, and suddenly feel lighter. I spare no glances for the Big Kahuna, the Fireball, Crazy Mouse's streaming rainbow lights, the pet crocs, or the deep fryers, just beeline it to the wood-frame booth, off solo in the riverbank grass next to the Ferris wheel. Though I miss the challenge of sneaking a ball by a batter and burning the catcher's mitt with heat, tonight the carnie will have to do.

He's juggling small metal balls, a live garter snake, and a lit cigar. He catches the cigar in his muscular lips, as if to acknowledge an alien presence. He's short and scrawny in his Uncle Sam highwaters, but what the turkey-necked barker lacks in size, he more than makes up for in mouth. "Just you?" he asks, pressing his palms on the counter and looking toward the swarms that are everywhere but his shop. While his faraway look can't seem to forget the days when the ball toss booth was all the rage, by some sleight of hand he makes balls appear in the basket on the counter. He picks up my wrinkled dollar, holds it up to a colorful string of lanterns, and scoffs around his seesawing cigar, "You hit a pony?"

"I hit the Franklin Mint."

"Hmmm," he says, considers my curly head and truck-stop muttonchops, which frame a squared-off jaw and a scar below my left eye. I'd like to check my watch, but if I want to keep my job, I really don't even have time for that. Before I can walk the carnie commences his next bit, wrapping the garter snake around my wrist. "Big bones," he says, then measures the breadth of my back and the squashed vee from my shoulders to my love handles. After stretching the snake heel-to-toe along my size-12 sneaker, he turns the reptile loose in the grass. Still on one knee, the man lays his ear on my paunch as if listening for a second heartbeat. He takes a thoughtful drag off his cigar and muses. "Looks to me like you hit the mint chip."

Fuck work. I tie my sweatshirt around my waist to cover the exposed white meat where my T-shirt recedes from my pants.

"But it sounds like you still got room in there," the carnie rasps. He gets up and straightens the sign on an easel advertising a special grand prize: Dinner for Two at Bennigan's. "All you gotta do is knock off all 10 targets in a row. If you miss, you're done. Or start over. 10 straight strikes, or *fowl* balls," the carnie quacks at a 4-3-2-1 taper of rubber ducks – several paces away, on an elevated pyramid of shelves – so his cornball pun isn't lost on me. The subtle back-lean of the hutch, framed for maximum distraction against the fiery burps from the refineries across the water, isn't lost on me either.

"So what'll it be, Hoss? Eat your heart out? Take your sweetheart out to eat?"

"The three balls I paid for will do."

“Fire at your leisure,” the carnie sighs as if it were his dying wish, sneaks me an extra ball, thus making four, and crawls back up his stool. He sucks his cigar and exhales an expanding smoke ring.

Shot number one hits the ring of smoke and nothing else. I sidewind the next, wobbling a lower target. The carnie whistles a snake-charmer tune, and the dime-store duckie plunges into the grass. With the third and fourth balls, I wipe two more ducks off the bottom shelf.

“Holy cow – pie!” the carnie chortles through his bullhorn and evidently sweating who’s the one getting hustled here, tells me to enjoy my evening.

“I am,” I say.

Another dollar, another three targets kaputnik – a personal best of six in a row to my credit – and guess who’s having fun, now? Somehow I’ve succeeded in putting all the rest of that shit out of my mind. I’m aware of only one burning need: to lay waste the four lurking birds, ride this friendly buzz to work (late again: 5 for 5), and return to dad’s old flop room where *I* will reign undisputed champion, numero uno, ball-toss king.

Ball-toss king?

Another issue. I’m down to my last bill. This detour unlike so many before is a good one. I’m glad I’ve taken it. To the people shuffling by and the few staying to watch, this probably appears to be some jokey carnival game. But to Kenesaw Bucks, it is also a long-awaited, heaven-sent invitation to victory. It seems a lifetime ago that a place card that read “Bucky” beckoned me to the victor’s table. And if I can’t make it to that seat in these parts, where can I?

Of course I splurge the bill.

Meanwhile, with color in his cheeks and a lively step, the carnie is blaring his horn at every corner of the sloping park. “Never thought I’d hear myself say this, folks, and it pains me no end, but if you don’t come quick, you’re apt to miss history in the making.”

The way the carnie winks at me, I start to worry if 1) I’m getting him hot or 2) I’m in on the joke/have become one of the attractions/am destined to spend the night in the trailer full of idiots.

“But for every inch of poise and finesse he’s shown in this little corner here tonight, I’d bet double he’s a goose egg with the girls.”

Or, 3) the joke is on me. I oblige the carnie with a no-handed gut-flex that busts the knot of my sweatshirt so it falls in a pile at my feet.

“Might call him ‘batter’s dream.’ Or ‘coach’s nightmare!’”

Some curious folk saunter over, and the carnie gives it a rest. He returns to his stool and takes a satisfying drag off his cigar. Cupping the new batch of weighted balls in my throwing hand, I eye the four targets that are left. Rocking back, turning sideways to the shelves, I kick my leg high.

“But!” the carnie lunges to the fore, “if a curveball stops spinnin’,”—

My sneaker hangs suspended, stretching flat as if groping for the landing of a steep staircase.

—“so can the world,”—

Spying over my kneecap, I hold for the carnie’s last rasp.

“...and vice-a-versa.”

I unleash a can of momentum. My weight drills the earth. With three jackhammer stutter-steps – pow-pow-pow – I launch the trio of balls into three of the four standing ducks.

Voices behind me go, “Whaah?”

The man drops his horn and scratches his pinhead. He collects the winners from the grass and adds them to the other six. Nine straight. Eight more than anyone had seen nailed by The Incomparable Thunder Bucks. Just one more throw for a perfect game.

Rather than bask in the glow off the carnie's pate, I wax pathetic...because in rainy moments I've beaten myself silly with all the things that might've happened if I'd stayed and played out the 9th inning of the championship. What kind of future might I have had, if I'd stuck around and put the nation's homerun king in the book for the fourth time that day – no one had before, no one has since – in front of the most luscious of babies, my very own sugar magnolia, Justine, instead of bolting like a little rat under the grandstand?

It is finally time to write a new ending, or shall I say new beginning...

"One ball, please." I clap all that's left – a quarter and two nickels – on the counter with certainty.

The tugboats cruise upriver; horns wishing me a hearty good luck. (Back atcha Captain.) Over my left shoulder the Ferris wheel drizzles peanut shells that flit over the midway like so much confetti. Over my right, a sweet-cheeked girl, with serious curves, raises her funnel cake and blows powdered sugar my direction. And my heart...whoa, sir...lurches at the thought of "Dinner for Two at Bennigans" with another person on hand to do anything more than gape at my ability to put it away.

"Dollar minimum, champ," the carnie snickers at the troika of coins. "Nahapennyless."

"I was kinda thinking an exception could be made."

"Why, praytell, would you think that?"

"A minute ago this was all kinds of history in the making. Now it's just – you're gonna make me say it?"

He waits.

"It's my birthday."

"You don't say? In fact, don't say. Lemme guess."

"Old."

He says he wishes he was that old, does me another quick once-over, and exclaims, "Twenty-nine!"

"Twenty-nine? Dag, dude. I'm twenty-two. What do you, what do you mean, twenty-nine?"

"Twenty-two, then. Sorry. If you was twenty-nine, you'da let me be right, and I wouldn't have to ask you to please scoot, other people—"

"My bad, my bad. Whoa. Okay? Check it out." I go down my T-shirt and fish out dad's gold necklace and diamond-dusted pendant. The trademark #12 has bought countless brews and surely will help this lonely drifter find sixty-five cents of generosity in his heart.

But the carnie's fixated glance goes through the pendant to the design on my T-shirt. "Y-e-ah," he says, poking his cigar at the words **Cheese Stake**. He slyly leans across the counter. "That where you grew the—" He taps ash onto the arc of my stomach.

"Never mind," I growl more at myself than him. I feel like an ass standing here at my age, falling back on the cursed #12, which can't even wangle a free toss from a third-rate fly-by-night. But as the carnie licks his lips for the next victim, I do the unthinkable. I tear the necklace off and lay it on the counter. The gawkers press up. The carnie spins back around on me.

"Come again?" he hisses fiendishly.

"Will you be here tomorrow? I mean the show, will it be here tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is tomorrow. The rules specify 10 tosses in a row, today."

“The heirloom is collateral for tonight. I’ll trust you with it. Let me shoot, and make it or miss, I’ll be back with the other sixty-five *fucking* cents at the end of my shift.”

“Those stones real?”

“It’s worth money in the right circles. *Beaucoups*.”

While the carnie ruminates, a small hairball of a man wriggles through the crowd like a scout, yet with no contract in hand. I wait for him to grab the pendant, so I can bust his knuckles, but he simply drops a dollar, and withdraws. “My money’s on the kid,” his unnervingly cocky voice says.

The carnie squints toward the voice, which is somewhere below my armpit. “Scout for a rival circus?” the carnie asks.

“You could say that,” the fragile voice replies.

The carnie reluctantly dishes me the ball, and I turn slowly to nod and say thanks to my sponsor. The guy is thicker than the carnie but not much taller, years younger and only slightly less funny-looking. He has a beard and a modsquad afro that partial-eclipses the Ferris wheel, the night, everything but the brown smiling cheeks.

I gaze quickly away, befuddled, trapped, and lonelier than hell. But there are onlookers, ramshackle rides, and in the distance, a whole city, twinkling above tenements and warehouses like a candelabra on a battered upright. The ball slips from my fingers as my blue eyes swing back to my hairy benefactor. “You were bald, man,” is all I can croak.

“Sure ain’t now!” the carnie squeals. Then he reaches across and tugs the garter snake out of the dusty gray coils of the big afro I didn’t know I was looking for.

“You fellers a team,” the carnie chuckles, then waves the snake overhead to faint applause.

At 6pm on your birthday, you might scramble for the midway, scatter the boys and girls and their parents like bowling pins. You might search the sky with a final fluttering thought of circling back and shooting that last bird out of the rafters. But when that creaky voice tiptoes up your neck, “Now that right *there* is some *fucked* up shit!” tell me your ratty sneaks don’t pedal without brakes from – *what* is a carnival doing in Philadelphia on the 1st of March anyhow?

As I zag windmill-armed and crazy-legged between the rides and off the lot, Willie Chance barely moves a single muscle. The one he uses to palm Thunder Bucks’s gold chain and #12 pendant.

Chapter 2

Allow me to sketch you a horror show:

Nine stops down the commuter rail, nearer the end of winter, the billowing, heaving afro-of-a-man grumbled at the muddy, warped home plate, “If somebody – if any-a y’all catches this – scratch that – gives the expression he got jam enough to run down one of *my* balls, the next thing I hit’ll be the showers, before the hot turns cold.”

But since it was already early March and he saw a losing streak coming over the horizon, Willie Chance just snapped the top button of his windbreaker over his Adam’s apple. Then he crouched, cocked the fungo bat at a nasty angle as if defending himself against one of those first-practice-of-the-year headaches, and belted another fly over the heads of the worst-place team in

college baseball history. Unlike the other balls from the half-emptied bucket at his feet, this blast might've been caught had someone risked a sprint and a leap. But bundled in sweats and turtlenecks, the fifteen jamless Hill College Oaks simply watched the drive sail into the blackbirds perched on the center field pickets.

"Well at least I'm still damn good," Willie wheezed. He rocked onto his tippytoes – which made him 5 foot 8 and a quarter, less the highfloating ball cap – to behold homerun number nine's roll through the dead grass between the outfield snow fence and the woods beyond.

Once a remote dairy farm run by monks, the land Hill College for the Deaf now occupied was one of the largest private properties in the upscale suburbs of Philadelphia. Over the decades, gated communities, malls, and office parks paved flat the neighboring farms and forests. Likewise as word of the school spread through the hard-of-hearing world, the college's population grew. So did its needs. Neo-Gothic architecture sprang up on every usable foot of the hill and meadows, up to the winding brook that hugged the school's back side. Necessity finally converted the original stone monastery into a girls' dorm, of all things, sitting grim and solemn as ever, a hundred feet behind the fence in left.

But in three years coaching – even as the wind rippled the snow fence's slats from right field to left and into foul territory, where it shook the empty hay barn and silo – what Willie Chance has never once contemplated was that since the deaf school's founding in 1948 only one part of campus hasn't changed: the cow pasture-cum-baseball field and its wooded backdrop.

"Whuh-uh aah...you do-eeen?" an Oak player naseled with a loopy grin while he chunked Willie's homers back into the field of the play.

Showin' you how they do it on TV, Willie replied with his right hand while flipping off the Oaks with his left. Resting the bat on his shoulder, he got one of those premonitions of his that the Oaks might be enjoying his homerun derby a little more than he was. They were all grinning like hyenas moments before the kill. Some seemed knock-kneed to hold in a piss, while others taunted Willie to send another into orbit.

"That's funny?" Willie grinned toothily back. "I'll show you fuckin' funny." He hit a liner off the wagging ass of the first baseman, whose back was turned, and who was bent over well too long to be tying a shoelace.

"A-HEM!" The sustained blare came at Willie not quite out of left field.

"The fuck is that?" He reeled, primed to deliver the double-bird to the top of the third base bleachers, max occupancy seventy-one.

The Oaks stormed the infield with the first real life they've shown all day. They were unable to hide their hysterical delight as the college president, Elaine Miller, in a business suit busting at the shoulder seams, waddled down the stands between the barn and backstop. She faced Willie from her side of the chest-high fence.

"Here to discuss that raise I put in for?" Willie joked in speech and sign language, with the fools hooting at him in the background. "Or we talkin' lifetime achievement, today?" He hunched in order to moon at Elaine's face in a supplicating way.

Deaf her whole life, Elaine had never warmed to chitchat or happytalk. She wasn't a battleaxe on a regular basis, but that afternoon it was her forgiving smile that was absent. She bent, scooped a foul ball lying at her feet, and winged it to the pitcher's mound. She whisked the loose strands of prematurely graying hair from her green eyes and asked, "How do they look this year?"

You tell me, Willie signed and scooted back to home plate.

One might think the deaf college's president might have had more important people to nag on a bitter day in early March. The former football great – that's Willie – had never claimed to be an expert on this game. But starting his third year at the Hill College helm, he'd figured that if you're freezing your nuts off, it's too cold to be on a baseball field. Meanwhile, all the other squads were in Florida practicing, scrimmaging, and bonding at the Days Inn, IHOP, and Olive Garden.

Conclusion: if you were fool enough to wander into this deal, why bother asking how the Oaks look? The blind could see that all fifteen players, when not musing dreamily at the planes climbing from Philadelphia International Airport, were still ducking last's season's downpour of eye-rolls, titters, and jeers. Overthinking how to begin the new season on even footing with their less-challenged opponents and how to appear handicapless while converting random energy into lyrical motion, the Oaks seemed about as limber as wooden horses on a merry-go-round creaking to a standstill.

"Keep your gobber up," Willie crooned for his ears only after the third baseman laid back on his heels and let the ball play him, instead of charging a dinker that proceeded to roll untouched through his legs. "Dial 9-1-1!" the coach teased as the shortstop, second baseman, and center fielder pussyfooted toward, then all but ignored, a blooper that Willie could've run out and caught himself. While the players pointed at each other and scowled, Willie offered Elaine an orange slice from the plastic baggie Arminta prepares for the team every night before bed. The prez declined. Willie snuck his inhaler to his lips and took a life-extending pull.

"Craziest damn thing," he said. He nibbled an orange slice.

"What?" Elaine said.

"I was 160 pounds in pads and in seven years in professional football I never got so much as a bruised ego. Next thing I know, I'm waking up in a ten-foot cell with some big Southern dummy, in a Pennsylvania valley surrounded by all them little pointy hills. And diesel truck depots. Wasn't in that johnson – joint six months, but the day after my Aunt Odessa passed away, I can't even crawl out of my cell. Had this empty feeling. In my chest. Know what I'm sayin'?"

"No. What are you saying, Willie?"

He spat out the orange rind so she could easily read his lips.

"The fastest man in the NFL caught asthma. I even went to the prison nurse, 'Can you *catch* asthma?' And you know what she says to me? After she meowed, that is."

"I can only imagine."

"She says, 'Even *you* could catch it, Willie.'" He laughed out loud, said yeah, and peered between the planks in the bleacher section, beyond the parking lot at the railroad tracks that cut through campus, where a commuter train was rolling through. (Though Willie's preferred mode of transportation is the bus, Arminta insists, because of his asthma, he take the train to and from Hill since it drops him closer to home. Every evening, he waits for her to get back from night classes at Temple Law and punch his ticket. If Arminta says, "Don't go nowhere," Willie stays home. If she says, "I'm leaving you a Lean Cuisine," and he says, "But," and she says, "Eat the motherfucker," he eats it.)

"Now that right there—" Willie grumbled, took another suck from his inhaler, and refocused on Elaine. "How them Oaks look to you this year?"

"Like a bunch of in-patients stumbling around in their pajamas," she murmured so he could hear and the Oaks couldn't see. "They'd look a lot better—"

"If you'd lean on the Board for new uniforms. I got this boy, Nunu, can do it cheap."

“—if their coach,” Elaine compacted a few unmelodic words, “—did what he was brought here to do. Lead the team to victory. At least once every couple years.”

Willie popped a new baseball out of a box on the bench. It was on the early side to start exhausting supplies, but maybe if the Oaks could see the rock, they could put on a passable show.

Elaine said, “I realize a team is only as good as its players, and all teams have losing streaks. To be fair to this group, no team in the school’s fifty-three-year history has ever come close to winning the division. Not even in Joe Hanks’s day.”

“Who?”

“But after seven seasons of owning last place, the Oaks have become a laughingstock. So this may come as a total surprise to you, coach, when I say, ‘Congratulations!’”

Maybe he was getting a lifetime *underachievement* award.

“For the first time in history the Hill College baseball team is going to make the playoffs and sweep the championship!”

Willie crushed his afro into his cap and nodded at Elaine’s note pad. “Put us down for better than last year. And next year, we’ll shoot for better than that.” He showed her the fungo bat and new baseball. “Meantime, Elaine, this is the middle of my workday.” He drooled onto the ball and buffed it in, hoping this manly display would get her hopping back up the hill.

“Good of you to remember,” she said and sat in the bleachers.

Willie walked slowly to home, rattled. She could’ve just as easily called him to her office to bust his chops. Why the shenanigans? But if she wanted fancy...

He squatted bowlegged over the dish, stuck out his boney chest and rock-solid glutes, and swung his hips. But before he could a rope, the day slumped behind the woods, and shadow brushed away the field’s last flecks of color. Willie snatched the ball out of the air and went to the bench, muttering, “I shoulda studied. I shoulda got my 4-year degree. Then law school. I’d made a good attorney. Instead of whippin’ my butt every time I turned around, Aunt Odessa, if you’d whipped out a picture of this: modern-day record for most receptions in a season, most yardage after catch in the playoffs, three times All-Pro, Super Bowl co-MVP...America’s Favorite Black Man pushin’ 40 – with *these* dingdongs – I’d got you A-plus. So many of ’em—” The ripped and scattered clouds have turned dingy yellow. Willie entreated them. “This shoulda been my time to *coast*.”

Willie finally remembered the Oaks and noticed they’d been meandering around the field like their farm animal predecessors. “Ain’t gonna be none of that this year,” Willie said and grabbed the tom-tom drum on the end of the bench. He whacked it twice, getting the Oaks attention on the third. They looked over numbly at their pagers littered across the wood bench. Few would ever buzz with messages from girlfriends, pals, or even wrong numbers, and though most of the Oaks knew that, they straggled over anyway until Willie jabbed the fungo at the pitcher’s mound. As he did, he got this weird feeling, better than any his inhaler could impart, because the team magically changed direction and huddled in a semi-circle in front of the pitcher’s mound’s dirt. Of course Elaine missed this sweet maneuver as she was buried in her note-taking. Willie started across the infield in his vintage Docksiders, then turned. He looked high over the bleachers and ascending trees at the great hall which spread across the crest of the hill like the upper deck of an old stadium, maybe Boston, Chicago, or Los Angeles. (Its gray stone and craggy rafters hunker quaintly majestic above the rolling lawn, forest, and railroad tracks. The tracks separate the serious business up north and the playing fields in these flats to

the south.) Along the sides of the hill and its sprawling lawn, the schist-clad library, observatory, academic buildings, and dorms blended into dark blue evening.

This was arguably the most peaceful place on earth Willie could afford these days.

And until a few minutes ago, expectations were low, and the pay solid. If he could get Elaine off his case and concentrate on leading the lackluster Oaks out of the cellar for fifteen minutes, the doors might open for him to pick up the basketball job, double his take-home, and at some juncture rent a condo down the shore. In two more toughed-out seasons Arminta would pass the bar and start pulling the kind of dough Willie had at the peak of his career.

If she didn't trade up, that is.

Before his sabbatical from society, they'd talked about children. After his five at Graterford, they agreed to hold off until Arminta graduated law school and had a career path. Now they have sex about once a quarter. She's begun to socialize after class at the hopping joints around Temple, and she's made a point of keeping her law school life separate from theirs. Is she protecting Willie from her eager peers that might ask too many questions about his past? How many ways does she think he might embarrass her?

Willie snarled, "That's why she ain't want me gettin' too far from home. Keep Joe Blow Potlicker out of the public eye at night. Hole the brother up by day in the sticks where can't nobody hear the stupid shit might dribble from my lips even if motherfuckers wanted to! Has my sweet girl getting' ready to say she's had enough of the losing, too?"

The lamps switched on across the campus. Willie grimaced until the dots of light formed a crooked line blurrily resembling more than one brokenhearted smile. Taking the mound, he stood on the pitcher's rubber facing the semi-circle of Oaks. "I swear," he said. He set his jawbone like those of coaches long past. Then he blasted out a medley certain to break the sound barrier. "Next week we open! Anybody think about baseball in the last nine months?"

Typically starving and bored at the end of practice, the Oaks straightened and their eyes popped wide. Willie wanted to see if this change in attitude was making it through the dusk to the seat of judgment in the front bleacher row. But he didn't bother because he surmised the team might've only been shocked to see their coach pretending to give a shit.

"Anybody think about revenge?" Willie signed and said in staccato shouts. "Last season was a real disappointment for me. I took it real personal."

"Your wife send you to your room?" someone garbled.

Willie blazed on with crisp signs and words. "Back in October when the foreman at my pipe-fitting job got his leg chewed to the ass in the foundry, you know what I was thinking about?"

A few hands shot up. Al Pagano toed gingerly out of the semi-circle, then strut like a stripper juggling imaginary boobs.

Willie acknowledged him. "Yeah, I was thinking about a woman, all right. *Alice Deal*." The raised hands suddenly melted. "Alice Deal College." Al Pagano crossed his arms and legs. "The Alice Deal Crusaders. Now that's a baseball team." Willie paused to watch the Oaks squirm.

"It would be one thing if this *was* a titty club, and I was the only one sweatin'. But it ain't. Is it, Pagano?"

The 20-year-old pitcher scratched the tuft of hair in his cleft chin, shook his head, and fell back dramatically into his teammates' arms.

“Ain’t *no* time for lovey-dovey baseball! If a routine fly ball lands, next time’s gonna be three dead Oaks lyin’ next to it! Shit, my boy Nunu could practice better than y’all. And he’s...”

“Indisposed at the moment?” someone else warbled.

Willie snapped his fingers in a way that said, *Anyone who doesn’t want to get cut from the team best get in rows and stretch*. He took a short breath, hit the inhaler again, and figured that’s that. Willie would’ve been right, if Al Pagano had gotten dirty with the rest of them. Instead the Oak pitcher, who happened to be an ace only at smelling horseshit, stood above his obedient teammates and waited for further explanation.

Willie rumbled down the mound, “Are you on drugs, son?”

“You mean right now, coach?”

(Al’s voice is an abrasion on the air, particularly since he’s never had the benefit of *hearing* a word in his life. Then again, straight out of Brooklyn with a brother who’s a fence and two uncles doing ten-to-forever, Al could really mangle the language if he’d been exposed to the home dialect.) Even so, Willie has also noticed a little more home-schooling couldn’t have hurt the child. Because ever since the Alice Deal Crusaders came to Middleburg last spring and spanked the living fuck out of the Oaks, the streetwise city boy, who usually set a defiant tone for the team, no longer slid into bases or dove for smashes, whether a game was up for grabs or beyond hope. Al started coming to practice and games as though he were swinging by on the way to pick up a date. His cap seemed surgically attached to a thatch of rolling black gunk Willie liked to call “the tar pit”; his middle brow, which Willie had seen him tweezing in the weight room mirror during one of Al’s marathon body sculpting sessions, hadn’t darkened to the rest of his tanning-bed-orange – make that apricot – skin. In the rear pocket of his baseball pants, where most guys carry batting gloves, Al kept a soft-pack of Newports. The kid practiced so hard at looking good, it was no wonder he didn’t look like a ballplayer. Even his hearing aids gleamed in the churchy twilight.

“Cafeteria closes in fifteen minutes,” Al said. “And Willie...your boy, Nunu, got this?” Al flexed his biceps.

Willie smiled dotingly. “Cop a squat, Pagano. I can find a pitcher with a dead arm anywhere.” Al hit the dirt. “I don’t mind the maple syrup on your head, but you best double-scrub that uniform, son. It looks white trash.”

Willie grunted with pleasure. Striding through the rows of stretching Oaks, he randomly pecked looks at their mystified, upturned faces. He zoomed in on Booe Raines, a Scandinavian hoss and a half and a pillar of pallor in more ways than one. If Al Pagano was mostly good for secondhand smoke, Booe, despite his strapping physique, could be counted on for cheap singles and overripe whiteheads that threatened to erupt whenever the player smiled, which, mercifully, was about once a semester. At 6’ 4” and 240 with hearing aids that push him over 250, the pigeon-toed Atlas was displaying unusual agility for a hulk. He was bending his torso past rigid knees, touching his toes, and still contorting a wonderous eye up for kudos from his coach.

That’s great, Booe, Willie signed to him, then turned to block Elaine’s line of vision, in case she happened to lip-read the other half, “you’re gettin’ really good at bending over!” Willie bonged the drum. The players rose. Willie signed and said, “Tomorrow is another...to be sure...let’s just say...if I don’t get hit by a bus or win the lotto, I guess I’ll see y’all next time.” As an afterthought, he added, “And no pulled hamstrings on the way to dinner. Deaf studs are hard to come by!” Willie sighed into his soft hands, “*Really* hard to come by.”

(Not that the Oaks are all clods. Several players have college-level ability, and there are a few live arms. The mix of kids who'd matured in the deaf private school environment and those who'd played in mainstream high school programs is just about right. However, rather than the mainstreamers driving the others to be more aggressive, the private school kids have had a weakening effect on the mainstreamers. It doesn't help that baseball is the only team sport where being able to communicate verbally is essential. Of course the biggest hindrance to Hill baseball success is that there aren't enough deaf kids to go around and far fewer deaf athletes to recruit. One salty drop compared to the ocean of hearing talent from which all the other college baseball programs draw.) So while every new season has come with a full roster, by the last meaningless doubleheader when the grass in back of campus was high like wheat, the Oaks were lucky to dress nine. And only because Willie would yank one out of the library or student center.

Elevated on his Docksiders, Willie counted the last of the players going into the field house – one short – and lowered his heels onto the barrel of the fungo bat. He tumbled over player number fifteen. Evidently the kid had stayed to help the coach collect the equipment. As Willie wriggled in the mud, knowing that Elaine was still watching, he swore, “To hell with y'all” and “Who needs y'all?” But back on his feet, he towered over the player, really towered. And he felt terrible for the twerp, who was scratching the earth for a pair of glasses so gigantically insect-under-a-microscope-like, you had to wonder if it might be better to go through life blind. After watching this mole dig to China, this fly bash into the same pane of glass, Willie picked up the lead frames and set them in the dark depressions on the tiny nose. Then he chopped this sentence from the air. *Let Coach Willie get the rest.* He articulated his words in slow clips, “Hop a shower, Shorty.”

“My name is not ‘Shorty.’” The kid didn't fool with signs and the tone would've been considered puny even by deaf midget standards. “And I don't shower with them.”

Willie cupped his hand around his left eye to get Elaine's unraveling orange and gray kinks out of his peripheral vision, so he'd have no distractions as he stared at the outfield, the stone dormitory, and the college-town shopping strip. Luxury sedans glided back from jobs with expense accounts east and west, and dipped below the commuter tracks that undoubtedly lead to tax shelters inbound and out. A train stopped at the little station house, down from the barn and sixty yards wide of left field. The breaks hissed and the boxcars dumped out a dozen or so people. Willie couldn't come up with a name for the goggle-eyed gnome below him, but he did call himself idiot for not even glancing over the roster of players.

From year to year, many of the Oak faces had changed. Some transferred to regular universities or went to community colleges closer to home. Others quit coming. Could anyone be expected to know all fifteen players in a couple weeks?

“Kid, I don't care if you don't shower until we win a game. But where I come from, ‘Shorty’ is a term of endearment. It means I noticed you.”

“Where I come from, my name is Jenna.”

“Jenna?”

The shrimp signed the letters: *J-E-N-N-A*.

“Well, Jenna,” Willie chuckled (though now noticing) a short rubber-banded pony tail in back, “that's kind of a girly name. Wouldn't ya say?”

“That's because I *am* a girl, Coach.” Her green eyes swam like tropical fish trying to find their way out of round tanks. “It's also why I don't shower with them.”

“And that right *there*,” Willie said as he strode afro-high to the bleachers, “is some fucked up shit!”

Jenna squawked at him from behind, “And another thing, Coach. I can demolish a six pack of Schaefer in under a minute.”

Are we finished with the nonsense about winning? Because I got a real problem I need to discuss with you, Willie signed to Elaine.

The school president spoke her response. “Not nonsense, Willie. Optimism. As you know, for us to stay private there is a limit to the Federal aid we can accept. Since 9/11, private contributions have dried up. When I recruited Professor Goodnight to Hill six years ago, we committed to a new science lab. It’s already 2002. He’s had time to cultivate allies on the Board.”

What’s that have to do with first place? Willie signed.

“The Board got an offer from a developer.”

What kind of developer?

“Real estate,” she said, irritated that he kept signing.

Which real estate?

“See those trees?” Elaine indicated the giant hardwoods between the homerun fence and town. “They’re standing on it.”

And the lab? Willie signed to Elaine.

“You’re standing in it. This field is the most sought-after unimproved land in the county. Operating the baseball program costs over a hundred thousand dollars a year.”

Willie was thinking how little of that went to his salary and how a hundred and ten could put them on a beach in Florida right now.

“Selling the land those trees occupy would cover construction costs. The baseball program’s budget could offset the new lab’s expenses.”

“I know how to handle the Board,” said Willie.

The center of town got silent. Rush hour had bustled off, and the train platform’s floods had kicked on, holding the field in a kind of glossy darkness. Elaine’s eyes were wide and absorbing. He could see she was straining not to roll them at him. He edged forward into the light of the barn door’s naked bulb, so at least Elaine would not have to strain to see his movements.

“Here’s what you do,” he signed and spoke in syncopated animation. “You tell the Board these things don’t happen overnight. Sell the trees! Build the lab! You need a place to build it? Knock down the old lab. It’ll be two years before you’ll need the baseball program’s budget.”

“We’ve cut football, lacrosse, and most of the women’s athletic programs. We’ve retired the observatory. The student center is only open on weekends. There are few places left to cut. And we can’t go two years without a science lab.”

Jenna dragged the equipment sack past them into the barn.

Willie nodded after her. “What are you gonna tell them? Baseball’s not for you, it’s for normal people.”

“Rich people.”

“A spark is all it takes. I tell you, they’re good kids.”

“Exactly, Willie. They’re good kids. And unfortunately being good isn’t good enough anymore. I believe that life’s lessons can be learned on a baseball field. But the Board, to which I answer, is no longer convinced the team can learn anymore from losing.”

“So the baseball program’s getting scrapped.” Right behind his former ambitions. During the five years he spent up in there, he completed his degree, having been promised

something small in the Eagles' front office when he got out, a steppingstone to something better; he'd always been a fan favorite. That was when Thunder was still alive. After, Willie's "how stupid!" offense became the work of a criminally diabolical mind. The sports world rose high and mighty like a city on a landfill, and it tacked a sign on every door that read, "Let in every kind of felon but him." The secretaries and receptionists gave Willie the cold shoulder. The forgiving said he was cursed. Even local trading-card shows didn't call.

Willie made an inclusive circle between him and Elaine. "*Our* baseball program's gettin' wasted. Unless we show that miracles are better than science."

"I'll never say anything is hopeless." She stuck out her chalky chin at the field. "It's not like we're making professionals out there. Doctors and scientists, on the other hand, are our future. Which is the way the Board looks at things these days. *They've* performed miracles keeping this college pumping with life and this field intact. But we've reached a point where every foot of campus has got to produce. Win the league, and you can bank on this: I'll take care of the Board. And the really good news is: the Oaks still have a chance."

The scoreboard just this side of the barn – two rotting 2x4's mounted on short stilts, painted "Home" and "Visitors" with lines of zeros on hooks – wavered in the breeze. Willie said coldly, "We got a chance because the season ain't started yet."

Elaine reached for and held his arm, an unusual gesture for her. "I like you, Willie. I like the way you care about the kids. But my number one priority is populating the workplace with high-achieving, sophisticated deaf people. To prepare them to communicate as seamlessly with the hearing as they do with each other. To have the confidence to do so, without apology. That said, in order to keep state and Federal funds rolling in, we cannot bring the hearing world into the student body. The faculty is my call. And I like it integrated 50-50."

That was old news, but he saw she was having trouble with the next part.

"When you interviewed, you were up against some real baseball coaches. I fought with the Board to get you. The major reason you're at Hill, Willie...is that you can hear." She pushed a flutter of hair from her bone-white cheeks. "You fit my quota."

"That's the major reason you hired me? What was the minor one?"

"I believe in second chances. Even more than firsts."

She's wasn't being mean, but it still smarted Willie. "Thanks," he said, while Jenna strolled with an almost sexy sway – if you could imagine an ass in those over-sized baseball pants – through the small parking lot and into the darkness of the tunnel under the rails. "I suppose."

"So what this important problem you need to discuss?"

"Oh, yeah. So-uh – so much for learning ASL in the joint."

"I thought you learned ASL to communicate with Ronald." It sounded like 'Run-nel.'

"Who?"

"Your nephew," Elaine said, then followed Jenna up the hill.

But who could hear her in the ear-splitting racket created by the congregation of blackbirds in the trees? Crossing the third base line, Willie froze on the pitcher's rubber, facing the outfield and woods. The pine branches drooped under the flock's weight. Now that would've been some kind of toss, pegging one of those bigmouth blackbirds senseless. A long-beaked one thought it had the jam to edge out into Willie's ights.

Willie's windbreaker sagged to the left from the weight of Thunder's gold chain and #12 pendant. He reached into his other pocket for the shiny new baseball. He wound and kicked the length of his leg. Suddenly hundreds of birds chattered out of the trees, swooping into a line and

flying straight at the ex-abbey in left, where a girl was studying in a window. The flock turned slowly over the college strip and dissolved into darkness before rising and scattering like buckshot across the low moon. Willie lowered his leg and stuffed the ball back in his windbreaker.

“I shoulda studied my ass off,” he said.

Chapter 3

“Mawr!” Sook cries.

I am a gladiator, so I break momentarily from samarai-ing the peppers, load the back of my spatula with a pickle slice, and flip it across the kitchen into the waitress’ open mouth. “One for you,” I say, reaching under the grill for the stash of peach schnapps. “And one for me.” After a quenching swig, I hear a feral growl from the rear. The ante has been upped. I am ready with the over-the-shoulder technique, firing a brace of slices that plaster Sook’s glasses. She giggles. The peppers can go screw. I take my game to the kitchen’s open back doorway. The screen door is pinned wide open by a sleeping stray. Garbage sacks clump around the dumpster. My soles nestle across the doorway’s threshold. As I reach under my apron and down my shirt for a good luck rub of the pendant’s golden links, I get nothing but wiry chest hairs. My toes clench as though grasping for something that’s slipped away. Like the opportunity to stand spine-straight like this and take a shot with Willie Chance when I had it. The timing was perfect. It would’ve seemed a nutty coincidence. I mean why come back to this shithole just to hot-tail from the only person who could tell me – with a fair amount of manipulation – what really killed Dad?

“Mawr, big boy!” Sook cries, after stifling her spasms of laughter and peeling the pickles off her glasses.

Chapter 4

**Alice Deal College
Blackie Stay Out, PA**

Tischler, the only other black guy in an Oak uniform, patted the sides of his own neatly-landscaped afro. He was a shade over six foot and had long rippling muscles, even though his diet was ninety percent diet Pepsi and ten percent strawberry Twizzlers, which the Oak captain chewed to calm his nerves during games. He was gnawing a red stalk on the top dugout step, while the rest of the crew leaned off the bench wide-eyed as if waiting for the big fluffy monster that puts everyone out of their horrific misery to get it over with already. Tisch was analyzing the situation. He couldn't decide whether he would never forget this field because

- A. the orange infield dirt
- B. the moss-green grass
- C. the big-league style visitors' dugout
- D. the giant horse-gob Alice Deal was about to uncork on the Oaks?

Uncrossing his light brown freckly arms, he broke his trance and followed his teammates gaping pieholes to deep left. There, the three-time defending champion Alice Deal Crusaders single-filed out of a door in the homerun fence, which was sculpted and painted to resemble a tall field of cornstalks. As the Crusaders high-stepped to their positions to game show introductions, Tisch drummed the bongo until every awed and terrified Oak saw only on him. He wiped the perspiration off his mocha cheeks with a towel. He laid the towel over his shoulder and clasped his hands as if to lead the Oaks in prayer. Squinting hard for something uplifting to say, Tisch then gesticulated a megaton explosion and matter-of-factly signed, *We're screwed.*

Look on the bright side, Al Pagano signed back, his snake tattoos uncoiling on his pitching arm. *This way we can start drinking by the third inning. Glug, glug, glug.*

Booey's Viking head hung.

Willie struggled up the dugout steps, panting, "If my chest weren't aching like a son of a bitch, I'd kick those simple motherfuckers' asses so hard that our quote three senior leaders, they'd land on President Elaine's head long before a new science lab comes down on my own."

Later though, at the end of the fifth, in the hole three runs, with the bags empty and Alice Deal's pitcher throwing seeds, when Booey fanned at consecutive fastballs, and the Deal catcher handed the big boy a buck and told him to go buy himself a swing, Willie asked himself, "Why didn't even at least one score and break the Bucks's kid's arm instead of standing that little pisser one...oh yeah...that future plus past thing, cost me a second at the carnival, but damned if it don't end costing me pink-slipped, dee-vorced, and put away again." He shook his head ruefully, tucked a dreadlock under his cap, and signed and spoke to the perennial benchwarmers, Luke and Jerry Covalowski, "Get us an orange, Larry."

One twin is named 'Jerry', Jenna signed to Willie, *the other is Luke.*

Willie slurped the proffered orange slice.

Neither is a Larry, Jenna signed.

Willie ate another orange slice.

In fact, there's not a Larry on the team.

The coach acknowledged the female presence by signing and saying, "Thank you for the update, Jenna." He slapped the bills of the benchwarmers' caps and said, "And thank you, Larry."

Jenna shifted her scrutiny to the idle mutterings of the Alice Deal Crusader coach, Silver Duke Donnelly. While the Crusaders were most of the way to putting another in the win column, Jenna was the only other person in the park aware that their coach needed a Zoloft. She had detected a mournfulness in Silver Duke's grin. She learned that the Crusader coach was the kind of sap, who got teary-eyed at the student section's age-old tradition of lofting buckets of last

year's acorns onto the Hill College fielders. Because with four innings of trampling yet to come, Silver Duke's glorious baseball diamond was "gonna have more pits than that third baseman's face!"

Jenna made a reptilian noise in her throat.

"You can read that man's lips from over here?" Willie asked her.

Every filthy word.

"I need to get me some of them supersonic glasses?"

You already have them, Coach. She pushed them snugly in place. *I was reading lips before I could walk.*

"Right on. What's he sayin' now?"

How come the Commies who run the league think the Crusaders should waste an arm on this freakshow. That Booeey is Goliathly malformed.

"He knew his name?"

Called him the ugly fuckling. Then he said that Boo – Goonzilla – is a certain danger to himself and all within range. He wants to know how some psychiatrist didn't bar Booeey from projectiles and sticks instead of allowing some 5 foot 6 inch O.J. to encourage the creature to go outside and play with them.

"Five eight and a quarter," he snarled, then muttered bitterly, "on tiptoe."

"And I'm four eleven and three quarters in heels!" Jenna almost fell over laughing.

"O.J.," he winced. "O.J. ain't got the balls for an afro like this!" Willie hollered across the diamond. "Have to pay Al Cowlings to wear it for him!" He turned to Jenna. "What else he say?"

She breathed on her glasses, wiped them, and squinted through them. "I'm getting something...Tinkerbell."

"Tinkerbell? He's talkin' 'bout you now...right?"

She didn't say anything.

"Like he didn't sit in traffic for hours to pay fifty bucks to watch me play. I'll give him this: even with the buck teeth, the fool looks *real* pretty in a baseball uniform."

Probably because his mother dresses him every morning, signed Jenna.

Willie scoffed, "Calling my man – uh, my uh – ain't no Tinkerbells on this team."

No, sir, Jenna signed.

"Say...I been here and there and...well, put it this way: what would you say if I found us a pitcher."

We got Al, she signed.

"No, no. A good pitcher. A guy who'd strike you out just as soon as look at you. A Nolan Ryan type. You think we could beat a team like this?"

Jenna said, "A Nolan Ryan type – no. Nolan Ryan – yes."

"That right there...that's the smartest thing I've heard all day. You know – you know who you remind me of?"

'Yoda'?

"Who?"

A horse fly?

No. You remind me— Willie stopped.

Curiously, tears were welling behind Jenna's telescopic lenses. Her really not-so-unattractive green eyes were submerging lily pads. Little dots of perspiration had formed in her fuzzy black mustache. She signed, *Please don't say, 'You look like the back of Al's balls.'*

“Who said that?” Willie spoke quietly.

She sniffled.

“All you look like to me is Jenna Snickin’ Snockin’ Woods...alias, Assistant Coach!”

Assistant coach? Moi?

Yes, Willie signed and introduced the Hill pine-riders to their new first base coach.

Meanwhile, across the way, the Deal sideline was standing to a man. They were on the brink of pandemonium from watching Booeey negotiate a scattering of acorns, teeter heel to toe, lurch, skid laterally, and pancake in front of the bag at third.

After scrambling to his feet, the enormous third baseman signed to Tisch at shortstop, *Who the fuck is Alice Deal? Some famous forgotten sadist from the Middle Ages?*

That, or a martyr.

Tisch smiled as hard as he could to dam his own river of angry tears.

Come to find out, Alice Deal was a bit of both: martyr and sadist. A delectable prom queen who had wanted more from life than looks that killed (but not a whole lot more). So she enrolled at what was then called the Quaker Secretarial School. She became transcriptionist and then a very rich Quaker secretary by marrying a cardiologist named Infante, who she was much smarter than and who got all the credit for a heart monitor she all but invented. He had badly wanted kids, but she told him she’d changed her mind about children. She added old people to the list when he retired. Soon after Dr. Infante died in the 1960’s, the secretarial school’s handsome new president came around. The widow wrote a check with a lot of zeroes on it in exchange for the privilege of delivering the annual commencement address, which was mainly an exercise in warning the graduates that sex was to be taken seriously and marriage even more so. She gave her last address in 1970. As per the demands of her last will and testament that granted even more millions, the Quaker Secretarial School changed its name to Alice Deal College. It used its new-found endowment to secure further private donations and governmental support to become a state-level 4-year institution for women. The curriculum broadened to include hotel management, hospital administration, nursing, accounting, and botany. The doors opened to men in the 1980’s, and the school added majors they could pass, like history, English, and the history of video games (in English). Alice Deal would have been mortified to know she’d become just another \$40,000-a-year boondoggle for 6’ 5” airheads, who couldn’t pull the grades to get into a state university. And in 2002, enrollment hit 5,000, six times greater than the little deaf school’s.

Ignorant of all this colorful history, Booeey used his size-14 spikes to rake his area clear and begged the Lord for two things: one, to let him have Sarah, a voluptuous redhead he’d been pursuing shamelessly for three-and-a-half years; two, to let the Oaks pulverize the Crusaders. He even hinted to the Lord that there might be a convenient connection between the requests, one possibly leading to the other. For example, Sarah could commence a lifetime of hero worship as a result of his game-winning Deal-destroying poke, making this really just one favor. Albeit a pretty large one, since Booeey’s hitting Bobby Blanks’s fastball was a longer shot than Sarah’s falling for him without divine intervention.

Worse, or better, depending how you looked at it: today marked the seniors’ last date with the Crusaders – down already, 9-2 – unless something really extraordinary happened.

And it did.

Some musclehead got under Al's change-up, threw his bat down, and said, "Shit." The ball shot the sky like a Vesuvian plume. It got so high so fast, the cops were probably going to make it pee in a cup when it landed. Tisch and the second-sacker, Snooter, circled and waited on the edge of the outfield grass. But the ball kept spinning back toward home plate, which got the compact catcher, Hunt, the first baseman, Zernial, and Booe, from his corner, converging on the pitcher's mound where Al was looking to snub this convention without breaking a sweat or getting dirty. During the ensuing pile up, the ball and six Hill players thumped in the grass. The slugger walked home backward, padding his stats with his first homerun that never left the infield.

The Alice Deal mascot, whose Crusader costume cost more than it would to get Willie's boy, Nunu, outfitting the Hill squad in new uniforms, fractured a rib swan-diving in foul territory. There was breathless mirth in the Crusader dugout. There were badly controlled sobs of laughter that you had to stare at your feet to miss. The fans' barrage of acorns was inescapable, the last round showering Al Pagano. The Oak pitcher patiently flicked away two acorns that had glommed to his hair gel and threw the next pitch into the Alice Deal dugout. Astonishingly, it was the first pitch he'd thrown all day that hadn't hit an Alice Deal bat or player. Bobby Blanks charged up the dugout steps, his triangular hillbilly-goatee waving from side to side; the Deal coaches held him back. Al rolled up his sleeves, flexed his pythons, and said haltingly, "Come on, fuckhead." Then he worked in a complete in-service of his pecs, abs, lats, and trapezius for the half-sloshed sorority sisters before the ump ejected both players.

Willie told Jenna, "This travesty may be best viewed from the bus. I need you Coach Woods—"

"Yes, Coach Chance—"

"Hold down the fort." He pulled his cap down to his nose and weaseled as far as the gate where an icy finger poked the dime-sized naked patch of his neck. "Eee!" he shrieked, whipped off his cap, and turned.

President Elaine Miller said, "In a hurry, Willie?"

"What *you* doin' here, Elaine?"

This was a legitimate question, since she hadn't attended a Hill game since her father's passing two seasons back. During Willie's first year at Hill, Elaine's father was a welcome volunteer hitting coach. A straight-shooter like his daughter, Mr. Miller was thick-necked and beefy around back (she was getting there) – who had nothing but respect for Willie – and a bad ticker his doctor had overlooked. Mr. Miller keeled over in the first base coaching box of a game the Oaks were winning big. Since it was only the fourth inning, the umps called the game. Rainouts and exams kept it from getting replayed. So the Oaks had to settle for three wins that year, tied for last with the team they had been slaughtering when Elaine's father unceremoniously croaked.

"What are we all doing here?" Elaine opened her arms to the Field of Dreams. "No wonder they all laugh at us. If these weren't our kids, I'd be busting a gut, too."

Willie laid his cap on the dugout roof. "In this case, you are wrong, Elaine. I've seen major leaguers blow plays like that. I blew plays like that. And I was a receiver in the National...Foot-ball-luh Lea-guhh." He quickly added, "Three times all-Pro."

"That's called 'glory days,' Willie."

The Oaks were about to lose their shit. They pounded their gloves and tried to look mean in uniforms, whose once-bold crimson lettering was now Barbie-doll pink. That was Willie's contribution to his team's seventh ring of Hell. Following last year's Alice Deal loss, the most

filthy-feeling of his athletic career, Willie had dumped everything in the washing machines including a gallon of bleach.

Now his face twisted like the Clorox bottle cap. His stomach spun as if he'd chugged the bleach. He leaned on the dugout roof for support, put his cap back on, and yanked it down over his eyes, which were starting to glisten. He fluffed his beard over his lips so Elaine couldn't see his voice crack, "What am *I* doing here?" He was speaking metaphysically.

"Look around, coach!" Elaine snapped. "This does not build self-esteem! This does not make them want to compete in the real world!"

He pulled himself together and snapped back. "In my experience – in my *unglory* days, this is about as real as the world gets."

"We're not talking about you, Willie. Are you doing anything about *them*?"

"Well, I, uh – honestly?" He inhaled.

Elaine's brown suit and her patience seemed equally frayed.

"Damn straight. I been at it. Very at it. Beatin' the bushes like a wild man. Ain't found much, but why I been cuttin' outta practice early—"

"You've been leaving *early*?"

"Mighta found us a specimen."

Elaine looked skeptical.

"One of them, ya know, leader-ish...types."

"With a secondary-school diploma?"

He haughtily got in her face. "From a deaf high school."

She threw her shoulders back and let them hang loose. "Which one?"

Willie could feel his breath stop and cheeks load with cotton. He glanced at shortstop, where a grounder hopped high off an acorn and almost took his shortstop's head off.

That school in Texas, Willie signed to his boss.

"How about his grades?" Her tone was approaching casual.

High – er than this team's batting average.

"It happens there's a Department of Education grant available. Convey that to your prospect." Elaine almost purred, "What is this fellow doing now?"

Hiding from me.

Chapter 5

When not washing down blueberry pancakes with chocolate milk at Waffle House, learning the angles in dominoes from the VFW gents, trucking out to Ardmore to make last-final-finished-for-good payments to the bookie, or memorizing the outbound train schedule, I curse my purple for running around helter-skelter at the carnival in that asinine CHEESE STAKE T-shirt. Now I don't venture from dad's old flop without hesitating in the pink drip of the bar door's B A sign and peering both ways down Spruce Street. If there were an underground route to the Cheese Stake Grill, I would've found it. I take a different back street every night, casually survey the dining area from the corner, then hug the wall to the screen door

in the alley around back. In the week since near perfection at the ball-toss, I haven't whiffed or seen anything but grease. But I can feel Willie Chance.

"Anybody today?" I ask my manager, Charlie Potatoes.

Potatoes says, "Anybody what?"

"Asking about me."

Potatoes gets testy. "Who's comin'? The police? The Tibetan mafia? IRS forget to slap the duty on your underwear? You're startin' to gimme the willies, kid. "

"Not the willies, *the* Wil-lie."

"As in Chance? You must got somethin' he wants. Hah? Leftover from your old man maybe?" Charlie Potatoes is not an old man, but his few remaining teeth stick out like tobacco patina-ed tusks when he smiles.

I feel bad for him, even though he's grinding me down. "No. I've got nothing Willie'd want."

"I'm stunned."

Knew I shouldn't have been civil to the bastard. My jaw burns. I fiddle with the dial on the radio up on the shelf above the black, greasy grill. The dial spins and spins but the song doesn't change. I's stuck from decades of trans-fats. "This damn radio get anything else?" I ask, hoping that no one will answer, i.e., Charlie won't still be standing behind me.

"Just oldies that even oldies' stations quit playing."

I chuck the broken knob – over Sook's head and growling mouth – into a basket on the other side of the kitchen. "Ever played the radio game, Charlie?"

"Never heard of it. Good one, yeah?"

"Very witty. The object of the radio game is: be the first one to name the song and artist."

"I prefer playing the 'I get to keep my awesome job' game. Last one back to work is fired." The big honcho heads to the crapper.

"How 'bout you, Sook?"

She looks at me quizzically, almost like, "Hah-you know?" Truth is, it's not that in a couple weeks I've become the oldies king. I bought this particular information off a semi-elderly parking lot attendant when I was pulling out of the Horseshoe with a sack of silver dollars in the rental's glove box.

"Check it out: 'Who am I – I'm just that guy – who only wants to try – to make things right'."

For once Sook's mouth opens and no sound comes out.

"Monster hint, Sookster," I whisper. "It's by Bo Donaldson and The Haywoods."

She opens wider and cries, "Mawr, mawr, mawr!"

Wrong, but a heady effort so I polish the spatula for a game of pickle and correct her, "No, Sookie. 'More, More, More' was originally performed by Rachel Stevens and covered later by Bananarama. Never by Bo Donaldson and The Haywoods. It's called 'Who Do You Think You Are?'"

Because of the long bus ride back from Alice Deal, then the matter of a purse snatching and police report at the Prospect Park Septa stop, Willie was hustling to microwave the Lean Cuisine and waft it through all three rooms of the row house so the smell would linger long enough to sate the wife's sly nosing around, which would launch in t-minus ten minutes. He put his windbreaker back on and handed the Lean Cuisine to the first homeless guy he encountered.

A bright quarter moon drifted between the blinking red suspension cables of the Walt Whitman Bridge, then faded behind the roiling refinery output. Willie moved fast into a whipping coastal front that divided his beard into two short vines, so that he looked more wizened Chinaman than what his sweet girl would describe as an overly hairy nincompoop gone wild.

As the wind whistled itself out, Willie caught his breath in a soot-dark section of Philly. Around there, the brightest light day or night was the Tastykake billboard lady's smile. She and the wooden cupcake, which was lifted periodically to her lips by a mechanical arm, were mounted on the flat roof of a sagging pre-war tenement. Willie fluffed himself up before looking up at the Tastykake lady's glowing cheekbones and saucy lips. Her six-foot eyeballs flirted with him. "I'm just regrouping," he said, returning the adoring look. Then a sudden creak, and the real object of the billboard's attention swept up to her wooden smile. As the Tastykake lady's eyes narrowed for the rising fiberboard cupcake, everything fell back into its proper place. Willie finally accepted that in a town that booed Mike Schmidt in the twilight of his career, Hill was about all he had left. Aside from Arminta's one foot still in the door. And even that was starting to wiggle.

Last Friday night after the carnival, she had found Thunder's necklace and gold #12 in Willie's pants pocket. "Hey, yo! Three-times-all-Pro," she'd cooed.

"Oh-oh," he'd said.

"What is this doin' in my house?" She twirled the pendant like a mace.

He rapidly explained how there'd been all this frizzy shit in the sky over the river.

"Frizzy or fizzy?" she'd said. The chain was whirling faster than the teacups at the carnival.

"Yellow shit. Okay? It was callin' me. It was like, 'Come-on, Willie. Come-on.'" In lavish detail, with his hands poised to catch the gold mass should it fly at his head, he described the yellow shit in the sky stretching from their stoop to the river, how he'd traversed eight city blocks without reaching for his inhaler, only to have the wind knocked out of him when he got there. "I grew up on The Gulf," he hyperventilated.

"I know. That's where I met your ass."

"Then you know what Aunt Odessa always said."

"That you'd make Jesus Christ pack heat?"

"That after a hurricane the only thing standing on the fairgrounds is the targets at the ball toss booth," he'd said resolutely, daring her to sock him with Thunder's talisman.

"So?"

"Honey, this is my sphere of the law. If you said, 'Yo, Three-times-all-Pro, name the one person in the world could beat the ball toss booth,' you know what I'd say?"

"I'm pullin' for somethin' intelligent."

"I'd say: all that's left of him...is this." Willie snatch the glittery #12 pendant from the very tip of her index finger.

"Then get rid of it. Or I will fuck you up."

Now squeezing the chain and medallion until his lungs contracted, he said, "I don't know how I let this happen to me, but I guess *I* need y'all."

But just like Arminta, the Tastykake lady knew how he'd let this happen to him. She was keeping track that night eight years ago, too. Like then, Willie was going to meet a hurler with dead aim. And like then when the wooden cupcake swung back from the Tastykake lady's ruby lips, Willie followed her gaze to a neon sign down the block and the words **CHEESE STAKE**

burning above a neon stack of poker chips.

At mid-shift, exactly one week after waking up in that crusty mattress (etc., etc.) on your birthday, the grill fits you so well you can be moo with the best of them. You might guess, despite the run-in at the carnival, that because of the many years that've passed since you'd last met Willie, you've become another needle in that haystack of an afro. I, for one, am insulted that I've been relegated to the depths of Willie's coif, particularly since he doesn't have to be in the room *for me* to feel him; that William Chance is fast-becoming a barnacle on the sole of my foot, a sharp and constant reminder that every step can be tricky whether going forward or back.

Nonetheless, I go, "Moo," and wait for Sook to go, "Mawr," as I slice the beef and onions and glance from the Amtrak schedule taped to the shelf to the adjacent-hanging the sandwich order. The order's particulars do haunt: *Gloppy mayo, onions that CRUNCH*. I may not be fluent in cow yet, but I do know that this grill hasn't seen an order like that since I was a child.

Nonetheless, I moo for support, only get an echo of hormonal blubbering. Sook is on the phone, mouth agape (to sob). I load the spatula and flick what I hope will be a comforting pickle slice, but end up blistering a third eye into the center of her forehead. She bawls. I throw the sandwich together, bring it over, and hug Sook to my apron. As John Cougar would...John Cougar Mellenkamp...as John Mellenkamp would...as all three of him would say, "No good deed goes unpunished!" The point is this: what is making an atrocious situation unbearable is not that I'm getting aroused as the waitress and my pregnant tummies meet, or that "Muskrat Love" has come on the radio, but that the song is by a duo I can't for the life of me place.

Sook digs her nails into my arms and whimpers, "Who sing dis song?"

"Muskrat Love?"

"Who sing?" The pickle in the middle of her forehead drips green streaks with her tears. She is in no shape to deliver the sandwich. Charlie Potatoes is taking his fourth dump of the day.

I stare at the sandwich and feel a cold sweat bust out of my cheeks. "I don't know who sing, Sook."

"But you Radioman."

I can't believe it either. Maybe it's that sandwich, making my eyes steam up. "I better deliver this thing," I say weakly.

I navigate the noisy, overflowing dining room by the used ketchup packets on the floor over to the corner where the little dude's massive afro looms. The sandwich's steamy meat and mayo dry my cheeks and kick my post-nasal drip into over-drip. At Table 15, I mumble enjoy your meal, and hope to get out of there with less fanfare than the last time. But I hesitate for a long second, time enough for Willie to clap his hand on mine.

"First of all, my exact words were 'grill the fuck out of the onions.' I said: *'black and crunch.'*" With his other hand, Willie fishes a wormy onion out of the bun, and waves it hypnotically in front of my face. "Does that look like an onion that'll crunch?"

"Doubtful."

Willie smiles toothy and gold, "I'm just playin', man. I'm not real particular about my food these days. Catch my drift?"

Some diner says, "Is that Willie Chance?"

"Yes, it is!" Willie announces loudly to the room. "Willie Chance back in the house. Guard your chickens." He stares straight at me. "Now, Slick. You tiptoed out so fast the other night..." Willie reaches into his windbreaker pocket and leaves his hand in there. "I got a notion

you might be the son of the late great *Thunder Bucks!*” He loud-mouthes the last bit so all the customers can hear him. “Hmm, Kenesaw?”

Silence, save for fries clicking in oil in the kitchen. More than a few diners look up from their food. At the end of the room, the bathroom door cracks open as Charlie Potatoes leans off his toilet seat for a peek. Some bespectacled yuppie dick twists around and crops a visual of Bucky’s mid-section with his palms and says with a frown, “Nah. I don’t believe it.”

I look around for a sympathetic face. Fingering my bowling ball bloat, I tell Willie, “This gut does need work. It’s getting where I can’t see my balls.”

Willie pulls his hand from his windbreaker pocket – empty? – reaches past me to tap the yuppie on the shoulder, and says, “So I guess nobody’s seeing ’em!” And the two of them cackle like tow old pals and chew their sandwiches. The bathroom door pulls shut, and Charlie Potatoes can be heard sliding back on his throne and chuckling faintly.

I make for the back, through the gossiping whispers and my sneakers’ squeaks as they gawp through the dried puddles of Coke. I snatch the bottle of peach schnapps and a fistful of raw beef, which, against my better judgment, I share with the alley strays. Before the screen door slams behind him, I hear Willie assure the room, “It’s good to be back. Thank you. And let me just say: in case y’all ain’t notice, sometimes the apple don’t fall nowhere near the tree.”

I’m on my heels. He knows how to counter-punch. I line up the metal dumpster and hit it hard enough to sprain three knuckles on my throwing hand. A couple more swigs and jabs, and irony sets in because my fingers gnarl like winter branches around the bottle of peach schnapps, and I fall...asleep, on the other side of the country from the only two humans who hope I still exist – my mother and sister – and from my own mutts still whimpering for me by the door every night.

Chapter 6

Only a baseball’s throw away, Willie Chance wakes up with knives twisting inside him. Just gas it turns out. And the wife is right there to cradle his head and rub his finger where his Super Bowl ring used to be.

Chapter 7

Way back when, the Bucks’s TV room had one of the first giant-screen projection systems in circulation, a gift to my dad (who was white) from Circuit City for a half hour meet-and-greet on Martin Luther King’s Birthday.

The night the screen was hooked up, Dad invited friends over and narrated my favorite film. “I strutted like a legend in the first quarter. By the end of Q4, my ribs cackled with every breath. I used sign language in the huddle and called for a pass to nowheresville since we needed everyone stayed in to block except our one receiver who could still walk, a taxi squadder, named Willie Chance.”

Willie took his cue from across the room. “They’d pulled me out of some jake-leg sandlot league earlier in the week.”

“In his stunning debut, the 25-year-old rookie dropped four easy balls in the first half of play.”

“Nerves,” Willie offered.

I was 10 at the time, and Willie’s side of the story always made my little heart tremble.

“After that,” Dad said, “I didn’t sneeze at the wideout’s side of the field. I made a vow that if I ever saw him again in my life, I’d cross the street.”

Willie played hurt, Dad sheepish. Then the two heroes led the room in a roar of sycophantic levity.

Dad touched the screen and explained the situation: the Giants’ line smelled meat. Dad smelled them because he compulsively cleared his post-nasal drip.

There were giggles and throaty aha’s.

Dad raised a finger and went on about how an ice floe had settled in his pelvis. He said he suddenly realized he would be dead someday, and be gone forever. “Between the hashmarks I got the meaning of life – that there is no meaning!” He made sincere eye contact with Willie, the truest of believers in the house – as if he too were part of the audience. Parents covered their children’s ears as Dad continued, “None of this shit matters. The microbacteria discovered in China that pre-dates all theories of complex life by 30 million years and bumped me from the front page, aren’t drops in the bucket, friends. They are vapor. You and you – health problems. You – vapor.”

My mother, who had spent most of her life smoking under the grandstands instead of cheerleading in front of them and who still refused to take anything too seriously, especially her own sandy-haired beauty-queen looks, rolled her eyes for Willie and yawned loudly.

Dad muttered sourly at the image of a lineman on the screen. “I told that moose to block for once. And if that didn’t work, to hold the guy until he proposed.” Rattling the cubes in his glass, he downed another scotch and restarted the video. “50,000 fans jampacked Veterans Stadium. My family on the sideline. Ten of the greatest athletes on earth protecting me.”

“What’s it feel like?” some red-nose, who used to humor Dad just to drink his liquor, called out.

“You’re peerless, Ted. Imagine: for a brief moment you’re insulated from intimacy of any kind. Then the pocket shrinks and some goon like Sidney Jones snaps your ribs like bubble wrap.” On the screen Thunder Bucks was laid out cold, under a gray sky brilliant with refinery smoke, where quiet choked the air from Ridley to Radnor, except, of course, where chips were involved.

The next image was of the scoreboard, and it read Giants 31, Eagles 27 Quarter 4 Time 00:57.

Dad stopped the projector, backed away, and let Willie take over. “Everybody thought he must’ve fumbled. The hit was so hard, people in the top row felt it. But he still had the ball. You know why?”

I shook my head.

“He wanted to win, Kennesaw! Now, I ain’t no Mr. Ten Commandments, but as Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior,” Willie began to spout, sending most of the room on bathroom and cocktail breaks, “when I saw the dude dead on the ground, I was so ready to get back to hawking Weber grills that when he jumped outta the back of that ambulance, I lined up as far from him as the field would allow.” Willie palmed his 8-ball head to emphasize the existence of a brain on a part of the gridiron forgotten by everyone but Thunder. Willie said it was then Thunder winked at him, and the (very) wide receiver looked at the defense and knew what he was supposed to do. “The Giants were still in man-to-man coverage. They checked out of a prevent. They’d been killing us all day with the blitz, and they figured on ending things before I could shake-and-bake

on the corner. They gambled that Thunder had nothing but dump passes left in him, and no one to throw to. All the old man had to do was buy an extra second, hang the pigskin high, and hope the rookie could catch it this time.”

Willie was more wounded than stunned that the son of his one-time best friend had ditched *him*. Twice! If anything, it should’ve been the other way around. At home, after Arminta had cooled off, she told him in her most counseling tone, “The kid could be anyone. He coulda bought that thing on eBay. Probably get you a knockoff at a fan store. But if you’re right, and I ain’t sayin’ you are, but if you’re right, I don’t wanna hear nobody was anything but hiding from that crazy-ass-family. *Mind your own.*”

How long would he be sentenced to *mindin’ his own*. Three years wasn’t enough?

So when the snoring started, Willie got dressed and slipped out to contemplate how he had lost the war to women without inciting so much as an eyelash flutter.

Clearly, Arminta was dreaming of better.

Chapter 8

I knew I can’t be dreaming, because I can’t shake off the pain and swelling in my finger joints anymore than I am able to purge my lungs of the rotten stench. But lounging against sturdy metal that feels like a gym locker, I’m not ready to surrender hope that the music is drifting from some cutie’s dorm window (not from a broken down station wagon on the Route 95 overpass) or that the warm mist is billowing out of clubhouse showers (not from the wet night filtering through braids of spaghetti I’ve sprouted in my garbage shanty in the alley behind Cheese Stake).

I spit out coffee grounds and an orange rind and claw the noodles from my eyes. I lick my tongue on a cleanish part of my sleeve and dig out the cigar stub I keep in my wallet for times such as this. About to light up, I become frightfully aware of a dead weight on my crotch.

Is it Dad’s chain and pendant?

Twisting my flab to the side, I burn half a matchbook just to identify the laces and cowhide of a new baseball.

I go to the street and poke through the mist for anyone carrying a bat. I’m dying to throw the ball at someone’s head, particularly that of Charlie Potatoes, jumping out, club in hand – surprise! There’s sudden clanking from above. I look up quickly and about 70 yards away, I meet the Tastykake lady’s eyes peeping through the mist. Her cheeks and lips seem frosting-spattered tonight as the cupcake bobs in and out of the slow-moving fog.

Staring into her open mouth, I recall the sage words of one of a former coach: “Although you’ll never be the athlete your father is—” (who ever would?) “—you’re a baseball genius the times you don’t let your head get in the way.” Heeding the old advice, I let my sneakers hang over the edge of the curb, like my spikes had done a thousand times on a pitcher’s rubber. I unkink and lay my bruised knuckles across the baseball’s yarn. There’s a surge from my fingers to my neck as my arm whips stiffly back. Striding into the street, I pushed well off the curb, and throw.

The ball spans the run-down walk-ups, busts the clouds to tatters, and beats the cupcake to the hole. The Tastykake lady loses a tooth in the deal. The fire escapes clang.

“Hurricane!” Willie Chance breaks from the shadows. His grin is so loud it could wake a hound on a porch. “Wake up, wake up, wake up,” I whisper to myself as Willie drops to his knees and hugs my arm as though it were a mast in a storm.

“Forget all the fat-boy jokes back there. You still pitch?”

“Used to. I tore my rotator cuff.”

“Your rotator cuff?”

“Where you’re squeezing. In half.”

Willie uses the upper ledge of my stomach to elbow himself up. “That ain’t no arm. It’s a rocket launcher, baby. If that’s half a rotator cuff, I’ll take it.”

“Take it where?” I strike my last match to the cheroot’s last bit.

Willie reaches over the flame and brushes a banana peel from my hair. He inhales and coughs, “Where you live at, man? The city dump?”

Willie’s attention drifts and he starts making some mental calculations that involve me, I infer because he must’ve forgotten I can hear his mutterings: “Even if the boy is twice his pop on a ball field, he can only play one position on a team of nine; but if he is half his pop in other regards...he might be the only person who can help me.”

“See ya,” I say, quickly following my cigar into the fog.

“Uh-huh-huh, Son. I didn’t break curfew to get run away from again! I came to tell you—”

“Good to see you, too—” I tramp faster.

“—I coach a little.”

“How little?” I stop and wait for him.

“Division III college baseball.”

“What’s that?”

“Baseball for amateurs.” Willie gives my arm a marshmallow squeeze. “How’d you tear it?”

The Tastykake lady peers from the clouds.

“How do you think?” I say.

Willie squinches his face and makes like he’s whacking-off.

“You used to be a nice guy, Willie.”

“I used to have reasons to be.”

Sweet cinnamon boils off the Delaware. The fog slides east above the tenement watertanks and into the black sky over Jersey. On the shortcut along the river, baseball weather seeps into my liver and spleen and makes my nipples hard. My arm feels as lank and loose as my bowels.

Fallen behind, Willie coughs hoarsely, “Hold up, man.”

I do, wondering – if this isn’t a trick – why Willie’s so gassed. His cheeks are orange, but he’s still slim and trim on top and built for bulldozing on the bottom. His words sputter like oil in a pan. “My team needs help –” He unfolds a Polaroid of a baseball field.

I take the picture. There’s a dumpy barn and a silo with an aluminum lid. There’s woods that seem to go for miles and a field so postcard-perfect that as my thumbnail runs from second to home, I lose a breath as though I just galloped in ahead of the throw, under the wire backstop.

“Nice.”

Willie taps the photo gravely. “Gonna be a Chuck E Cheese right there in center.”

“Fuckin’ slavedrivers, and they don’t pay squat, P.S.”

“Funding goes if we don’t take the league.”

A delivery boy with a stack of pizza boxes bikes past.

“Whattaya think, kid?”

“I wouldn’t describe that as a cherry assignment.”

“This could be your hook-up.”

The delivery boy pedals out of sight. “The only hook-up I need is a bacon, egg, and cheese. Besides, I don’t there are athletic scholarships in Division III.”

“There are for the disabled.”

“What?”

“Excellent.”

“Excellent what?”

“Ever hear of Middleburg?”

“Is Todd Rundgren’s from there? No, no. Great Dairy Queen.”

“Hill...” Willie mumbles the rest.

“Sorry. Didn’t catch that.”

“Just like that. For about six weeks.”

“Like what?”

“It’s a school for the deaf.”

I laugh out loud. “What’s after six weeks? The funny farm?”

“We win the championship. You go back to your shambles if so inclined.”

His venom has the power to rinse and scorch me like vinegar in an infected wound. The barges’ toots fade slowly as we cut down a side street away from the river. I can’t believe what Willie’s asking me to do, and I’m disgusted by what’s worming into my bones. Anyone familiar with this area knows that on any corner in the Tri-State area you could get directions from a superb athlete who’d hung a left and whose price was going to be a lot lower than mine. Why would Willie assume that risk? Is this his slick way of saying *I owe him*?

I walk with a forward lean as though there’s somewhere I have to be, but I can’t shake Willie. Three years I’ve been gearing up for an honest accounting from him, and in less than ten minutes Willie’s taken the wheel and is recruiting me to ride shotgun. Now I’m caught between being rude if I don’t make conversation, and Willie’s learning where I’m staying. The options make me sick. “How bad is this team?”

“Baaaaaaaaaaaaad.”

“What’s your record?”

“O and 4.”

Willie wheezes, “This is an opportunity to do something right. To change another person’s *perspective*!”

“Wow!” I smirk at his off-the-cuff poetry.

“I read it somewhere.”

“Wow-how!” I exclaim, as if Willie’s reading *anything* were even more impressive.

Willie actually laughs, “Up your ass, Bucks. At least you got your old man’s sense of humor.”

“Willie, I’d like to do something right, but this whole thing sounds kind of hackneyed?”

“What’s that?”

“Clichéd.”

“What’s that?”

“For example, I’d need a flower pot to land on my head. I’d need to suddenly develop a case of amnesia. Then we’d go out...and just win the league, right?”

“You’re a Bucks.”

I stub out the cigar on a wall.

“So we won’t lose,” Willie baits.

And coming from Willie the stroke feels really good.

He hoofs ahead; I hustle to pull even.

“And we *won’t* get caught,” he says. He stops directly under the flop room’s B A sign. I can ask him to wait while I bring down the letter I’ve been needing to give him; we could get things figured out, and maybe he’d give my dad’s pendant without my having to ask. But I feel like clay: not the kind that’s wet and can become just about anything, the kind that comes out of the oven cracked and twisted. “I don’t know,” I say huskily, barely covering the shame in my voice.

“Let me tell you what *I* know.” Willie squirts his mouth (with an inhaler?). “When I was in jail,” he breathes freely, “I would’ve jumped at this offer.”

They’d shut Willie in with the worst of the worst. The NFL and Vegas wanted an example made of him. Philadelphia was just the town for that. Did the other inmates respect Willie for who he’d been, or did they take shots at him because of it? I shiver from imagining for about the millionth time what Willie had gone through: cellblock paramour? Goose-necking the bar’s passage, I scan the lit bottles – reds, greens, yellows, blues. With only a couple football cards bending my wallet, I see nothing with me name on it.

“I’m not in jail, Willie.”

He snorts at the second floor window next to the flashing sign.

“It’s a bachelor pad.”

He pinches my sleeve. “How’s your mother and sister, Kenesaw?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Girlfriend?”

“Don’t have one.”

“You may want to consider a shower anyhow.” He lets me pass and calls down the passage for all the drunks to hear, “Thunder used to brag about what a natural you were. He was afraid you might squander it. Guess he had nothin’ to worry about!”

At 9am on your 19th birthday, Kennesaw Bucks you wake in your dorm at Princeton, stretch your arms from your body, and decide, “Today, I am going to rewrite the record books.”

Now as you take the stairs two at a time to the old flop, counting the cobwebs you paw through – a new high – you have a vague notion that three years of trying everything and following through on nothing, mostly due to nut-sac shrinkage, is not a record to flaunt. You correct yourself: 2 years and 317 days. You crawl into bed, pick a Dorito off your deltoid, pull a dime from your crack, and deposit the coin under your pillow.

“Squander, my ass,” I chuckle uneasily.

Chapter 9

“Is somebody dead?”

“Negative.”

“Somebody’s gonna be. It’s five-fucking-thirty in the morning!”

Out of instinct Willie went shh! and slipped his slender body and monster afro into the dorm stairwell to escape the bellowing and waited there for his heart to stop plunging. After he made sure the coast was clear, he tiptoed down the deserted hall, as if passing the drawers in a morgue, and doubled back to the open door, where Al Pagano stood grinning.

“Don’t you *ever* raise your voice to me. Or around me. Understood?”

The pitcher said, “Volume control is not my specialty. What happened? She finally kick you out?”

“I can’t sleep.”

“I can see that,” Al said, then signed, *Unless you got the Christ child in tow, there’s no room at the inn.*

Willie relayed the Board’s plan for the destruction of the baseball field and the team.

Al said, “My ego’s not tied up in how many baseball games I win.”

“We noticed. But you see, my livelihood is.”

“I’ll work on keeping my fastball down.”

“Who has that kind of time? Except maybe someone’s Uncle Frank? Rahway or Sing-sing, these days?”

What is your point, Willie?

“I got a hotshot with a problem.”

You interrupted sex to tell me this?

The covers rustled in Al’s bed.

Willie signed, *The transcript is a little...*

Let me guess. The transcript is a little...not his?

“Are you in touch with Frankie?”

“I thought you had this boy, Nunu?”

“I want to keep this one in the family.”

“Ciao, Willie.”

Willie signed, *You won’t ever have to get dirty again.* He waited for Al to process his words.

Al signed, *You press my uniform before every game. When I’m on the way to the locker room, I want to see the iron in your hand.*

Willie shrugged one shoulder and nodded.

Al’s hands gregariously explained, *Sometimes I’ll want the crease all the way down, but sometimes not. Depends on my mood, right? I’ve been known on occasion to toss in a little throwback motif. Wear my stirrups like the oldtimers. Might do a little Rickey Henderson with them. You know, up to the armpits?*

“Pagano, you can come as Anna Nicole Smith for all I care.”

“A new pair of sanitary hose every game.”

Too quick for Al to stop him, Willie slipped his head under the pitcher's raised arm to see whose auburn hair was hanging from the pillow to the floor. Willie popped his head back with a smug grin. "Hotshot also needs an audiology report, Al."

"Any deaf person can get an audiology report. You don't need Doctor Love. Your local M.D. will do."

Willie said nothing.

He's not deaf? Wait'll the boys get a load of this.

Willie pushed the door open further with the side of his Docksider. "Isn't that Booe's girl? In your bed?"

Booe hasn't even kissed her.

Willie signed, *Hate to be around when he finds out you have. I wonder if there's room at his inn for a tired coach.*

Two points for the amateur con. Need I tell you, Willie, if these documents are going to look legitimate, we'll need originals to play with?

We'll use yours.

No. Old ones. Nothing anyone would ever look for. From a school none of the ballplayers went to.

"Texas."

Al nodded. "No hayseeds in these parts. Should be in the clear with Texas."

"Last thing, Pagano. You're gonna have to learn how to speak more words than just, 'Nieghba-hood, neighba-hood, get laid, neighbahood. Get laid, get laid, neighba-hood, get laid, neighba-hood.'"

The bass line of "Born to Run" vibrates the legs of my cot for the ninth time this week. I get up and shrug into the old jersey. For a while now, it's been on my radar that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who have showered in champagne, and me. What if this is the last time that opportunity knocks? In the room's dark corners and the random vibrant sprays of pink I see myself down the line puttering around, and instead of, "Gimme the pill," saying to no one in particular, "Where's my pill? Anybody seen my pill?" Spring's coming on. Soon there'll be daisies – my skin prickles as though the flowers are popping out of my pores – and another year will be toast. Suppose I get Willie that championship? What comes to me? Currently my social schedule isn't exactly punishing, and I can count my options on my middle finger. Can I tear myself from this window where I now stand, shoulders broader than the ratty glass that flickers the image of a pitcher, lean and confident, juggling a rosin bag on the mound – or is that just the dust coming up from the floor vent?

I bat away the brown fog and buff the glass.

But the pitcher and the field are gone. All that remains is the rail yard's endless procession of Union Pacifics, trying to carry my reflection – Babe Ruth starter-paunch and all – over the river and back to New Jersey.

"Hello, Stud," Joyce Van Wyck said like she'd been waiting her whole life for Willie to come calling. The registrar was an M & M shy of 250 pounds and has a heart made to be trampled. A dyed-in-the-wool Eagles fan, she is fond of saying hang 'em all, give Willie Chance the ball; he's an innocent man! The clever alibi she'd invented for him – that Willie's career-ending offense was a botched publicity stunt – made him wish he knew her then. This

conversation happens every time Willie sees Joyce. That day she concluded on a huffy note, “Gets my blood up. You?”

“I got other problems now, Joyce.”

“Can I help?”

He flapped a stack of line-up cards. “My recruiting hat is on. Where do these ballplayers come from? I thought lookin’ at some old transcripts might jog something.”

“I thought you might want to pull my hair for a little while,” she said.

“How ’bout two chili dogs all the way?”

“There is nothing sexier than a black athlete with a brain.”

“Or a fat white chick without one,” he waited to grunt after she took his twenty and left.

Willie scanned 40 years of high school records and audiology reports. Eventually, the registrar plodded up to the door, but not before Willie had found a Mormon kid (circa 1974), who’d gotten meningitis as a teenager while on a mission to the Amazon and had graduated from the deaf high school in Texas.

It was a fabulous chili dog, and as he tugged Joyce’s long blue hair he regaled her with the kind of stories even the sportswriters won’t publish. A couple times he had to shift in his seat because the file was folded – neatly, for Al’s sake – in his underwear.

“How long, Al?”

A few days. I’ve been thinking. What if Hill checks his background? Calls the school down there?

“Won’t happen.”

Because they’re stupid deaf people?

“Because Hill policy dictates the registrar do that, and that’s taken care of.”

Going to iron her uniform, too? That’s a long-term commitment.

“No. Just chili dogs all the way. Chili dogs all the way.”

At the Orville “Thunder” Bucks partner-agency of The United Way, I let the two other students – second graders – poke my flab and laugh like hell, while the volunteer, a sassy brunette with working ears, demonstrates every conceivable sign for *stomach* and *blubber*. I want to know when I’m being ridiculed. The kids eagerly teach me the alphabet. We study the ASL dictionary together. The kids sign *love*, *peace*, *friend*, and *winner*. I sign *gutless*, *turkey*, *drip*, *dope*, and *where-can-I-buy-some-dope because-I-am-going-to-have-to-smoke-my-balls-off-to-get-through-the-whole-thing*.

Willie meets me in the back booth of the Waffle House.

“How was school today, Dumpling?”

Not...figured...me...out.

“Very good. And your homework?”

Absolutely...awesome...baseball...bathroom...big...bone...booty...call.

“What movies did we watch this afternoon?”

“Children of A Lesser God and Mr. Holland’s Opus. Blockbuster only stocks The Miracle Worker on DVD.”

“What did we learn?”

“Mr. Holland’s soundtrack bites. And William Hurt’s kinda full of himself.”

“No, fool. The actors who done play the deaf people. How’d they move; faces they make, especially emotions.”

“They were – not happy campers.”

“You might be mistaking scheming for unhappy.”

“I’m still feeling weird about scheming away the backing of some deaf kid.”

“The school needs money any which way it can get it. A scholarship kid split last semester. What does that mean?”

“Give the scholarship to someone who is already paying.”

“That’s in one pocket and out the other. Scholarships are for those who got nothin’. If someone don’t step in and help, and it’s late in the day for that, there will be a surplus of grants at the end of the year. Then Hill gotta send the wrong message to the benefactors. Something like: ‘try not to be so generous next year.’”

“Use it or lose it.”

“Right on. But ’cause of you,” Willie says, “the school can bank the same scholarship monies next year.” Like a total whore, I don’t ask where the grants are coming from, the U.S. government for example. I don’t explore the possibility that Willie and I might be engaging in fraud and conspiracy to break a whole chapter or so of federal law. “Anyone else know about this,” I ask.

“Fuck no! You crazy?” Willie says.

I get the distinct feeling that this will be the first of many lies Willie tells me, probably because he wants to keep me on my toes. He’s probably got a woodrow brewing right now just envisioning Thunder’s kid being locked up on someone else’s turf, having to get by on somebody else’s terms.

“We win the league, I see rich motherfuckers’ private contributions to Hill blowin’ away the borrowed tuition, room, and board in a very beaucoup way. You just an investment in the college’s future.”

“And it’s not cheating?”

“It’s a deaf college, man, not a deaf league! All our opponents has 20-20 hearing. You ever play professionally?”

I raise my menu, “Are we going to order?”

Willie slaps the menu down on the table.

“No, Willie, I have not been a professional like you. And I left college before the end of my freshman year.”

“Then according to the NCAA, it’s all good.”

I lift the menu again. “How do you sign, ‘Please sir, may I have some more?’”

Willie flags the waitress. “Blueberry pancakes and a chocolate milk, please.” He puts a stack of things on the table, including a microwaved Lean Cuisine and tells the waitress, “He’ll have a fork with that.”

Again, Willie? I sign.

The waitress leaves.

Willie shows me a high school transcript and audiology report for Harold LaMar.

“Harold?”

“Old family name.”

“Un-un. Bucky. Old family nickname.”

“Bucky,” Willie smiles. “Harold Bucky LaMar.”

I can’t sleep. I gaze longingly at the fast-food wrappers dancing in the city haze. I’m torn between a game of quarters or exercising, but since I possess nary a quarter nor a sip of

beer, I do push-ups and sit-ups until my muscles say: what the hell is this? Like a forensic engineer, I turn up crumbs in my gym bag, and I am careful not to disturb the letter I still cannot think about delivering. Even an accidental glimpse of one word, “Willie,” is enough to knot my neck, prickle my spine, and core the hum out of my chest.

Part II

Swing Time

Chapter 10

“*She’s deaf?*”

“Uh-huh.”

A redheaded goddess flounces amid an entourage of suitors over the wide flagstone path in front of the expansive, Greek-columned administration building on the flat of the hill.

“Ho-o-ly fuck is? Can you sign ‘aw-haw’?”

“No, but she can read your lips and body language from the flip side of campus. Attitude session, Hurricane. You’re here for one reason only.”

Classes must’ve let out because the inconveniently smoking-hot redhead and her gnat cluster soon disappear in a burble of students.

Despite the United Way work and Willie’s ass-breaking 7-day crash course that has me signing in me sleep, I recognize little language in the students’ gesticulations. I nonetheless eagerly sign, *Hello*, to them all.

Then it’s just Willie, my gym bag, and me lumbering along the pavers, and a man strolling at an angle toward us from the woods. In surfer duds, he seems to be enjoying the global warming we’ve been having recently. He looks fresh off the dunes, too – actually he looks like a male model who has been beamed to us from the set of Baywatch. I’m not totally digging his vibe. Willie’s delighting in it even less.

“You’d think that guy would have chicks out the ass,” he grunts.

Surfer-man, buffed and six-foot something, batting his prizefighter eyelashes studded by a yellow cake of sleep dust, strolls closer.

I flick a cocky, *Hello*. The eyelids flap open, revealing two ravenous, black spotlights that simultaneously take cold bites out of Willie’s spleen and my manhood. I shiver as I read the peeling silk-screened letters on the man’s banana-yellow wife-beater: **I’D RATHER BE SCHLEMPING A MOTA PROTEIN.**

“Another future Nobel laureate, Coach?” surfer-man says, drifting from ear-shot.

“Not as a scientist, Professor.”

“Who’s the major-fucking-geek?”

“The enemy. And don’t sign ‘hello’ to everyone we meet. You’re *deaf*, not a bimbo.”

“Didn’t you say verbal communication is the school’s *raison d’etre*?”

“What kind of raisin?”

“A French raisin.”

“You ain’t know no fuckin’ French. You lost your ears as a teenager. Meningitis, boy! You’re mad! Angry! Bitter! That’s why you do stupid shit like bag groceries.”

“I flipped burgers, you prick.”

“Word. That right there is what I’m talkin’ bout.”

Some kid in an Eminem buzz cut bops out of the building’s columned entrance. He has a hoop nose ring and hearing aids that bush three inches off each ear. A rap song emanates from his head.

“‘Guilty Conscience, I think,’” I say.

“Not now, Bucks.”

“The song is ‘Guilty Conscience’ by Eminem...hey, if this is Hill College for the Deaf, why’s that kid wearing headphones?”

“He can’t hear the tune. Just the beat. Like ‘legally blind.’ It’s called ‘hard of hearing.’ Half our players hear low or high-pitch sounds. One hears babies cryin’.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah. Another can only hear the Alice Deal second baseman hock up loogies.”

“What color?”

“With hearing aids some do one-on-one conversations as well as us. Which is why people will believe you read lips like a champ. If you’ve been workin’ and at community college, you had to. You got your basic signs and alphabets. You’ll get more stuff as you go.”

“I’ll take the headphones and iPod.”

“Not this Christmas. The game is over with meningitis. You’re d-e-a-f, deaf, baby!”

“I can’t hear a thing?”

“Nix.”

“There must be ten thousand transcripts in that room, and you pick the one kid who can’t hear squat? What’s the matter with you? Couldn’t you pick the guy who can only hear ‘Voulez-vous coucher avec moi’? Then it’ll make sense if I happen to react.”

“Too much sense. Like I been down to the Cheese Stake diner and found you. As for sex, I went 259 weeks without getting any – thank God. Is this something *else* we gotta worry about?”

“course not—” I fidget with the zipper on my bag. “Though I have scored on occasion.”

“Was anyone else in the room?”

My skull’s about to crack. I drop my bag and use two hands to massage away the pounding. “Anyone tried this before?”

In my studies, I found apocryphal stories about CODA’s, children of deaf adults. Though not deaf themselves, they bluffed deafness to get a free ride through school. Unlike me CODAs had to master ASL to communicate with and for their parents. I express my concern to Willie about my lack that in department.

“I don’t care about your signing,” he says. “Just never react to sounds. And *never* answer a hearing person who ain’t talking to you.”

I’m getting that familiar thrill from knowing no one has succeeded at this before. And the longer I’m around Willie the less tense I feel since there’s been no direct mention of the old days by either one of us.

“Another reason why meningitis is for us: you don’t lose hearing as a teenager without big-time trauma. English was your natural language, so you can formulate words without ‘hearing people’ wondering what’s up. Your speech can be good. Just keep it toneless and Texan.”

“You want me to mock the way deaf people speak?”

“I want you to mock Texas people.” Willie lifts my chin and winks. It feels nice to be touched a non-hostile way by him. “Remember: they deaf, Bucky. That means they can’t hear you. They won’t know you shittin’ on them. Okay?”

Then comes another one – unbelievable, these deaf girls. I’ve had no action in...another record not worth keeping. At the columns of the administration building, it is a warming 60 degrees. I discreetly check my underarm’s bouquet and accept that the drought is going to continue.

On the porch we look out across the highest ground in southeastern Pennsylvania with a bird's-eye view of the long sleek lawn descending into a mass of willows, chestnuts, maples, and a spatter of pink dogwoods, a commuter train lurching toward Philadelphia, geese flying north, one-story neighborhoods, power lines, the interstate, an airport, tire shops, and stoop-worn getaways with names like the Jackpot Club, all the way to the toll booths on the Jersey side of the Delaware. Tucked neatly within, where the land levels off, there's a baseball diamond cut from a wood.

Willie's not looking, so he doesn't see me lick my lips. He sweeps his arm from east to west, and suddenly I remember a football game in the snow in the front yard, holding Willie's hand in the huddle, my fingers getting lost in the shelter of the softest hands in the nation.

Willie's a step higher than me, which puts us just about eye-to-eye. He smiles as if reading my thoughts; I smile back. He says, "In the scheme of things, angry deaf boy. You ain't shit. Not a single one of us is. So repeat after me, 'I ain't shit. I ain't shit. I ain't shit.'"

"I am too shit!" I bleat like a kid on his first harmonica.

"Perfect."

Willie had scheduled Elaine for Friday afternoon since her bottom-line reports would prevent her from giving even the much ballyhooed Thomas Edison any more than a handshake and a kick in the pants. Not so, it turns out, with the moron, Kennesaw Bucks. She swishes between her desk and filing cabinet, clasps my hands, then signs and says, "Our hot prospect."

Of course, I blush.

"To what do we owe this pleasure, Mr. LaMar?"

Willie cuts in. "I was on the horn with every damn coach at every damn deaf high school in the country: D.C., Florida, California, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Nevada, Texas. The ones that could talk on the phone, that is. Got on that world-wide spider web, too."

"I was asking him."

"Tracked him down at Panhandle State...when he wasn't bagging groceries at the Wal-Mart in Goodwell, Oklahoma."

"Thank you, Willie."

"Another soul reclaimed!" the coach adds before zipping his lips.

She stares at me for an itchy while.

I sign the words Willie's bequeathed to me, that I'm a simple lad, whose gotten off course, but is still haunted by my goals: to play ball and be a poet.

"You *are* a natural, kid," Willie says in a muffled grunt.

"I'm sure Coach Chance told you we have high standards at Hill. We're proud of our academic reputation. I don't know from Panhandle State. But I'm sure the secondary school in Texas taught you something. I do not doubt you will reach whatever goals you set for yourself. But here you will learn to achieve them the Hill way."

As far as the screening process went the Hill way wasn't especially thorough. Kids dropped in and out, even mid-semester. But if academic requirements were met and the audiology report deemed authentic, the school would go hell-out to help a kid adapt.

Thank...you...for...chance, I sign another sentence my creator has concocted for me. I try not to wince at the intended irony.

Goodbye, Elaine signs abruptly and winks at Willie.

I sign, *Thank...nice...you...meet...us*. And just like that, a Bucks is a Hillie.

The lawn's paved path descends before us, snaking among sycamores and bulky Bradford pears, aflame in petals that are white as hot coals. As the path finally straightens, it disappear into a round black passageway under the railroad tracks.

There's something freeing about and hopeful about to tunnels. I whoop for the first time in over a thousand days. "I'm not *a* natural, Wilbo. I'm *the* natural!"

"A week ago, you couldn't make a cup of fuckin' coffee."

"This might work." I rub my hands together, ribs swelling with expectation. Perhaps in this ghost town, on this ghost campus, the laws of reciprocity are alive and well. If so, this time, maybe, both Bucks and Chance would get what they wanted.

Willie says "Just throw pills until your arm falls off."

"I don't think I can," it now occurs to me.

"Your knuckles?"

"They'll do."

"The half a rotator cuff?" Willie smirks in the semi-darkness.

"Never better."

"Yeah, buddy."

"That's why I can't pitch."

"Say what?"

"Unless by the fifth inning of my first outing, you want every scout in the Tri-state area camped behind the backstop."

Willie doses from his inhaler. "Then you're on in the sixth," he doses again, "get us the lead early," pulls deep, "and shut 'em down late."

"Put me at shortstop. I'll get 'em all, and I'll only gun 'em when I have to."

Willie gives his beard three lucky yanks and tries to stay level. "Tell me the last time you swung a bat."

"I don't know. Four years? I was a hurler mostly." I slap him genially on the back. (Paybacks are such a bitch.) His eyes are so bleary they light up the tunnel. He gazes upward and screams over the pounding of an arriving train. "A few years you haven't swung a bat? How'd I miss all this?"

"Chill, Wil."

"Chill, Wil?" Willie palms the flesh-bubble below my sagging ribs. "Looks like you be doin' nothin' but chillin'!"

"Yeah, but that carnival, right?"

Willie eyes me guardedly. "How'd you do that?"

"I honestly don't know."

Willie starts yanking his beard again, but this time he doesn't stop.

On the other side of the tunnel, the path rises across a service road into the afternoon light. Behind us, the train scattles off, and the little stationhouse on the edge of town trembles. The weeping willows swish and strafe our purview of the field. Willie leads us into the field house through an atrium that has a side office, an equipment room, and a training room. We pass through double doors into a dimly-lit arena. We follow a raised concrete walkway that coils around a rubber running track. The track loops around a darkened basketball court and wooden stands. Midway along the walkway, we stop at a red metal door, behind which comes the clattering of cleats and the opening and shutting of lockers. I catch a whiff of leather and oil.

"Willie."

"Not another disclaimer."

“I was a tough out in American Legion. Batted clean-up in high school.”

“Well you ain’t gettin’ in this door unless it’s to get Hill a championship.” The team is 1 and 7. They’d proven they could actually win a game, and the long odds are the way I used to like them. But the main thing is Chance and Bucks are joining forces to do something *right* this time around. All the baseball genius has to do is remember how to swing a bat.

I say, “Well, I am a Buh –”

Willie shoves the door open, and a number of heads swing around. Suddenly I need the doorjamb to stand. “Whoa!” I swallow and snatch for the coach’s windbreaker.

“Welcome to the Hill College Oaks,” Willie says to me and finally crinkles his eyes the way he had under the broken-toothed Tastykake billboard. He pushed me through the doorway and introduces me to the team.

Chapter 11

While the Oaks file out, I pull on the practice uniform hanging in the open locker on the end. My legs test the nylon. I rip the side seams of the henly so my gills can breathe. When my cap hugs my thick bronze curls, I leaned at the locker face and see the faintest ripple of flesh in the dull green paint. God, let me find the groove in time to turn back the Oaks’ 1-7 record. And suppose, I do, after all is said and done, will I find myself sitting alone on a locker room bench, washed up at 22, a slave to someone else’s past? I hike my britches. I’ve already decided that if myself in batting practice, I’ll beat it after a very long dinner. Then Willie can get back on the horn and that worldwide spider web.

Facing the corner, I bend my knees, stack my oven mitts – still too distorted to call fists – suck in the old butterball, and try to remember the angle at which I used to tilt the bat. It’s not until a third shoulder-tap that I gather I have company.

This pretty athletic-looking light-skinned black kid whips through some signs, jerking his head for emphasis. I get *school, Texas, you, shortstop, and that makes two of us*. His compact afro shakes imperiously.

Evidently by talking me up to lift the Oaks from their doldrums, Willie had ignited a few egos and worse; he’d made some already inadequate-feeling players homicidal. The current Hill shortstop is looking so hard for something revealing in my eyes that I’m about to cry, “Rape!” I backpedal an eighth of an inch and tumble over the bench into my open locker, but not before I swipe for something to break my fall. Blood sprays the floor, and my interrogator flees cupping his schnozz. I get my weight going upward, heave myself to my feet, and goose-honk, “Wait!” But the kid is deaf and hell on wheels. Even if I were in the best of shape of my life, he would’ve faded from view. So I take my own sweet time crossing the parking lot.

The Oak field is marvelous in its simplicity. The all grass base paths are out of another century. The silo’s silver hat doffs gentlemanly toward the barn and creaks in the peaceful breeze. The barn and silo both lie in foul territory, not 20 feet from the bag at third. I count off twelve slats of the fence that scoops the outfield from a shallow meadow that spreads up to a squat dorm and a forest. I jam a helmet on, and the sounds of construction from the other side of the trees dissipate. The field seems a graveyard of scattered headstones slouching this way and that.

It’s time to put things into perspective: if Alex Rodriguez couldn’t save the Texas Rangers, there would be no bringing these mummies back. The only things that seem to be breathing life are flexing nostrils out by the pitcher’s mound where a muscle-bound Italian-looking kid, with sleeves rolled up over his biceps, is taking practice tosses.

The silence is finally broken when this physical specimen of a moose covering third yells hey at Willie and signs what seems to be, *This is the savior? He's kind of short and fat.*

Willie replies, "So was the Buddha, Boo-boy," (which Boo-boy probably lip-reads as Boobie). "Enlighten us," Willie urges me.

I sift through a collection of aluminum bats that is so sad I can't speak. I'm more than motivated to get this over with for better or worse, so I quickly root out a long, thin, brand-less club that looks like it hasn't been used since the '50's for anything other than beating in fence posts. But at first wave, I like the feel.

I look over at the moose, who is staring back pie-eyed.

"Willie, if that moose doesn't stop looking at me like that," I say while inspecting the bat's barrel for dings, "it's gonna get uglier than a bloody nose. You better tell him to cut that shit out right now."

Hill can only afford to trim the field once a month. An ankle-high clump of weeds stumbles me, mid-trek to home. The players who are paying attention cackle. I spring up and make buffoon faces and sarcastic guffaws and that shuts them down cold until I threw on my sunglasses and reach in my back pocket under the tobacco pouch for the stub of cigar that is meant for times such as these. I fit the stub between my teeth to more derisive hooting from the squad. Ignoring the geeks, I step into the box with authority and point the bat at a giant elm well-nigh beyond the fence in center.

"Before I pass a kidney stone, please," Willie sighs.

The pitcher is also impatient to send the joker with the glasses and the cigar to the end of the bench before the sun burns out behind the field house cupola.

My big front foot sweeps the batter's box to fill in the potholes. I inventory the shaggers spread across the field. As they perk, ready for action, they seem like any other team I've played for. Some are big, some are small, one is little, one is – A CHICK? My shades roll down my nose. At shortstop, she's offering first aid to the black kid's swollen nose. After tissues are stuffed up there, the black kid pulls a red licorice stalk from his pocket and stuffs it in his mouth. After pointing at me, he commences a program of standing back and front flips ala Ozzie Smith.

"Oh yeah," I growl through a smile, "watch this, baby." The old bat glistens in the weakening daylight as I raise it high. A fastball splits the plate and the catcher's mitt.

Willie sighs again, "Nothing wrong with that pitch. Nice pitch, Al."

The black kid falls back on his heels with a euphoric cluck and spits out bits of red licorice like chunks of lava.

I sneer at Willie, "Your boy's trying to blow it by me. Batting practice is for building a hitter's confidence."

"Well you ain't doin' twinkie for mine."

"I said it's been a while."

"Just like whacking off."

Willie's high-pitched laughter rouses my spikes from their coma. I dig into the lumpy dirt for a comfortable home. Gnashing the cigar butt, I watch Al flick a hard one into the zone. I cock, empty my cheeks of cigar smoke, and swing deep. My sunglasses trip down the foul line, the smoldering cigar nub hangs from my lips, and the pudgy catcher, tosses the ball back to Al. The team draws a collective yawn: so much for the savior. Some of the outfielders start a game of catch, rightly predicting morning before any form of enlightenment would occur. I am so mad the veins in my scalp are threatening to crack my helmet. My scar thumps my face like a

flashing exit sign. I'm halfway to picking up my glasses when I hear Willie menacingly clear his throat.



The EMTs peel Thunder Bucks off the grass, lay him on a stretcher, and cart him to the sideline. Spangles cover Thunder's eyes and salt tubes twitches in his nostrils. He comes to, twelve hours short of the present, leering amorously at his wife, Gwen, and says, "You get that rig's license, Christine?"

Gwen Bucks balls her fists to finish what Sidney Jones has only begun. Dr. Mike slips the halftime X-rays to Thunder's face.

"I'm trying to have an intelligent conversation with my beloved," Thunder tells the doctor.

"`Trying' was the key word in that phrase," Gwen says as though she's about to be ill.

On the other side of Thunder's stretcher, you listen to the doctor benignly explains that all of Thunder's ribs are cracked and that means going to the hospital and he doesn't want to hear any more bullcrap, which makes you laugh (because an adult said that word) and fart (because this is not a laughing situation) and Thunder groans that if he could do *that* he wouldn't need the bums up front and - the hell with Sidney Jones - they should ship his boy's ass to Canton. On that note all the players and coaches laugh hopefully. Painfully struggling into an upright position on the gurney, Thunder tells you to come closer softly tugs your bubble-curls and transfers the magic #12 pendant from his neck to yours. It whomps your belly button. You feel a foot taller, high enough anyway to see something called the big picture.

"The trouble with your father, kids, is he never left high school," your mom is mentioning in the background.

You step up and say, "Dad, there's always next year. Listen to the doctor. He knows what's best."

Thunder sips the air until his cheeks fill like purple storm clouds and burst. "Look at the clock, you dumbshit!" the legend screams. And as the seconds tick down to 0:20 and another one of Zeke Zecoura's flutterballs misses the mark, you take the shortcut back to invisibility, past the sidelines' grim looks, the golden rope and #12 pendant gaining weight with every step.

"Hold it! I didn't mean that, Son! The problem is - I'm no good over here. In *there*, I'm great. Mike. *Doc-tor*. We don't have a problem till the throwing arm breaks. Catch my drift?"

"Nobody's caught much of anything you've thrown today." Mike taps off a hypo and smilingly adds, "You're no good *anywhere*. You can't even sit up straight."

Some pudgeball reporter in a green cashmere blazer blows through clearance wielding a pizza box for the EMTs. You'd like some of that

pizza but you have nothing to offer. Maybe you can trade him some of your hair, because the guy's symmetrical bald spot is surrounded by a hedge of hair that lifts and flattens like beating wings when he walks.

"Thunder - Sweet Lou Ellison, *Philadelphia Inquirer*."

Thunder looks up from his brooding. "Yeah. You sent the tiramisu on my kid's birthday. That was nice."

"You're welcome. And congratulations on a miracle season."

"Shoot."

Sweet Lou opens his flip-pad. "Still no Super Bowl ring, and the miles are adding up." He points his pencil at the ambulance. "Is this the end of the road?"

"Your editor know you're missing a great game?"

"You're missing a great game."

"You're not looking so sweet yourself there, Lou. I mean look at you. You should get those eyes checked out. It's scary."

"They're not contagious."

You now notice the blood vessels that produce a red film in the saggy corners of the reporter's eyes.

"You look terrible, Lou," Thunder tells him. "But I will say this: you got some kind of pluck."

"All due respect, Thunder, the premier 'D' in the NFL is on the field, and you're over here talking to me."

As Thunder snatches Lou's throat, the blood spots in the reporter's eyes bubble out. "The only 'D' that's gonna stop me is the one in 'Death.'" And with that, Thunder rams the doctor's needle into his own ribcage, flutters his eyelids, and grins stupidly.

Your mom says, "Let's not forget the two big ones in 'Dad' or the one expensive one in 'Divorce'."

Lou joins the EMTs for a slice before the pie vanishes.

"I wash my hands," the doctor says and zips his bag. From a speaker in the open ambulance door the Eagle radioman announces: "Incomplete, fourth down. Sorry, sports fans. This game ended when El Sid knocked Mr. Fourth Quarter into the fifth dimension. Eagle playoff hopes will be officially deceased in ten seconds."

That conclusion only encourages more faithful wails from the stadium's rafters: "THUNDER! THUNDER! THUNDER!"

Meanwhile, you've slipped to the sideline to offer support to Thunder's understudy, Zeke Zecoura. You close your eyes and pray for Zeke and the 50 impossible yards needed to keep the city's Super Bowl hopes alive and your father going to the hospital. The stadium roar builds. Frightened by the riotous pounding and the ground's trembling, you open your eyes to the oddest sight. Thunder appears at full strength right behind Zecoura, who is looking over the line of scrimmage before dipping under center. Thunder lays a benevolent hand on the second-string quarterback's shoulder pad, turns him, and demands the snap count.

"Two," Zeke grins happily and leaves the field to applause that's not for him.

I spit out the cheroot and grind it into the dirt underfoot. I am just Bucky now. Any old kid with a stick. The only way I've ever wanted the world to see me.

Al has stepped off the rubber to face his teammates. Now he's doffing his cap and bowing. *I almost caught pneumonia off that last swing*, he seems to sign to the fielders, then sneezes to their raucous joy. I wait for the pitcher to finish double-knotting his shoelaces and spit-shining his spikes. I dig in as Al claims the mound like he owns it, and spies over his glove for the catcher's sign. Eventually, Al winds. I discern pity in his face, and am about to run out there and slap it out of him, but Al lets fly with a comet instead. It comes tailing along the inside edge of the plate at the knees.

I swing late again, but get a piece.

The ball lines sharply into the right field fence. Someone plucks it out of the slats where it's stuck. A few raise their eyebrows. All turn to home. Willie's not the least bit titillated. I lift the bat and spread it to stretch the brawn in my back.

Al ransacks the pile of balls for one gashed near the laces and dabs hair gel in the wound. I don't protest. The pitch flares hard at my shoulder and in a puff, ripples off to the plate's outside corner. I drive it an inch west of the moose's cap at third, into the left field pickets.

Wood chips and kindling fly in the silence.

Al casually takes in the damage and gives his fielders a reassuring headshake.

I tight-lip to Willie, "If Muscles Marinara learns to keep that pitch down, he might have something."

Wheezing over to the grass between the mound and the batter's box, the coach signs to Al and says to me, "Don't forget: you're hitting a guy whose record is 0 and 4!" His laugh, if you can call it that, is a runny hiccup.

I crouch over the plate, daring the weak-kneed hurler to lay another on my table. Life is feeling as easy as a movie, albeit one starring Ben Affleck or that not-funny Wilson brother. But I'm the star of this one and thus I am loose and free, waiting on my soon-to-be-vanquished adversary, who is trying to find a cool spot in a frying pan. Al pulls his sleeves down over his big biceps, tucks his shirt in, and rubs his jaw until an idea seems to occur to him. Winding and bending sideways, he dangles his arm so low his carefully manicured nails clip the grass. Grass-stained already, with a flap hanging, the ball whizzes like an artichoke at my mouth. Instead of ducking or swallowing, I tomahawked the sucker into the sticks in center. The fence accordions toward both foul lines and collapsed flat.

"St-roke-age!" I gloat at my spikes.

Al turns to Willie, breathing hard. I get the important parts.

Willie signs, *Your fastball?*

Rocked it.

Curve?

Broke the fence. He's hit eighty percent of my stuff off the fence.

"Like I need a calculator. No-throwin' bitch. If I thought I could get two rosin bags and a baseball for you, Pagano, I'd trade you." Willie shoves Al into a somersault in the grass and picks a rock off the shriveled pile. Willie smiles humorlessly at my open stance and the lazy angle at which I hold the corroded pipe. Then the coach slowly brings the ball and glove together over his hat-crushed afro, whirls, and kicks the rising moon.

"Bring that *sorry shit!*" I bellow.

Willie reaches toward the flattened fence and open pasture beyond. The ball whips toward the plate, faster than anything Al had brung. I swivel hard just to get the ball to rise off the bat handle, a pitiful dink that unravels above the infield (and Willie's heavenward ha-ha-haaa!) like a roll of toilet paper. But the sheets keep coming and the ball drifts higher, until soon it is out of the earth's gravitational pull. The fielders one by one turn to watch the flying object write, "Kiss my ass," across the sky. The catcher peels his mask. From his knees, Al gapes through the silo's glare. Even Willie can't keep his jaw from dropping as the longest ball ever hit by friend or foe on the Hill College baseball field doinks off the dorm chimney.

The moose on third weeps.

Not a word is said by anyone, not even by me. The only sound comes from the bases snorting dust as my spikes tear through them.

And though the trot is extra-credit, I can't resist a half-assed cartwheel in front of the shortstop, who, out of Twizzlers, begins dinner early on his lower lip.

Chapter 12

Horror Show 2:

The holy-fuck-hot redhead announces herself in the main dining hall by using her tray to prop her melons. It is all I can do not to stare a hole in her. She, of course, has no awareness of me sitting at the table in the back corner. She prances toward the Oaks's table in front where the moose (they call Booeey), stands at attention and pushes the air with one over-grown palm like a crossing guard, and signs to her with his other oversized paw. I quit slamming down a macaroni and meat extravaganza that probably should be turned over to the Centers for Disease Control. I get my pocket ASL dictionary and listen for the annunciations that periodically go with the Hill students' signs. As the air freezes around the redhead, I attempt to piece together a warped translation.

Booeey signs, *Stop in the name of love!*

The redhead rests her tray on the table and signs, *Stop in the name of loser!*

Undeterred, Booeey glances for more soulful poetry from Al.

(Although he claims them as his own, the pitcher – I am told – has picked the lyrics from Willie's lips whenever the coach would disassociate at the end of the bench during particularly ugly drubbings.)

We both know that it's wrong, but it's much too strong to let it go now! Booeey signs with gusto.

Let it GO! NOW! the redhead stomps.

I lose the thread and go back to dinner since the specials on next week's menu might aged moldy orange rinds and spray-painted tree bark. But I keep an eye on our girl, Jenna, she of the big-time glasses, who'd been nursing our soon-to-be-ex-shortstop, Tischler. At an adjacent table of freshman girls, Jenna's face contorts with Booeey's swan song. Now, I'm hooked.

Sarah signs and garbles to Booeey, *Do I have to join the Witness Protection Program to get away from this?* She cracks Al in the back of the head with the book she's carrying.

Al lays his cigarette down, *May I?* He inspects Sarah's book. *Heavy stuff. Yours?*

No, it came with my macaroni.

Came with those jugs is more like it, Tisch signs to Al, the rotund catcher, Hunt, and the burly first-sacker, Zernial, before Sarah can catch up.

What? she signs, stomping her foot again.

Al hands her book back so he can wipe away tears, then sign, *That may be why I'm unfamiliar with Introduction to Feminism, Sarah. Of course, I know the sequel.*

Really? What's the sequel called?

Introduction to Bitch!

The whole table goes, "Eeyah! Ich-hich-hich!" Sarah huffs away. Zernial remembers Booeey and pushes a chair into the back of his legs. He recedes into it like a snowman in heat.

At the freshman girl table, Jenna signs to her friends, *Have you ever seen a more romantic boy?* She clutches her flat bosoms for the be-zitted oaf.

The other girls pass around her specs to inspect them for smudges until she claws the air. A girl sets the glasses on the bridge of Jenna's nose. She and I go back to following her teammates' dialogue.

Tischler signs gregariously something to the effect of to Booeey: *I guess it's blue balls again.*

Al's cigarette spews ash over everybody's food as he adds, *In the torture game, Booeey, she is squarely in the lead.*

What am I doing wrong? Despairing for an answer Booeey, he accidentally include the benchwarmer-extraordinaire Covalowski twins in his plea for guidance. Jerry C. and L in addition to being identical, have one other thing in common. They would never ever see playing time. But they take their contribution to the squad seriously. So, before any veteran can jump in, Luke C. signs to Booeey, *They see you coming, big boy, they see the corncobs hanging out of your pockets.*

Al slides forward and jabs his cigarette at both Covalowskis. *Let me explain this again. You have two jobs: to cheer and to shut the fuck up!* He shrouds their faces with smoke. He turns an empathetic smile to the Nordic giant's moonscape. *Booeey, women are flowers. And you are like a big blond clod of dirt.*

I'm still hoping for a miracle, Al.

Forget miracles, Boo. You need insanity. You need her to lose her fucking mind. Al thrusts both palms across the table for a double high-five from Luke and Jerry Covalowski, who emerge from the swirling smoke and writhe in ecstasy.

I stare from my seat at the edge of the earth.

Except for a few uncomfortable smiles in the locker room, the team doesn't seem know how to take me. And it's not until I lay down my bag and fall back on the unmade twin bed in Al's room (what a dream: a mattress without holes, and a folded set of sheets!) that I truly understand the pickle I'm in: hitting the long ball will not be enough to get me by...near term because Al is flexing his arms at different angles while giving his head the 30,000-mile tune-up in the mirror, and perhaps long term because he is screeching in a register that only elephants on the Serengeti might appreciate. During his "How-to-Act-Deaf training" Willie had warned me about deaf basketball teams' vibrating shrieks, done to distract opponents shooting foul shots. I

had yawned to Willie, “This is baseball. Ragging is encouraged. Just book me in the least flatulent room.”

In said room, candles glow on the dresser, the desk, and bookshelf, and shimmer all over a Daisy Fuentes posters and scattered heaps of dirty laundry. Al lifts a votive to his cig. The flickering light causes the snake tattoos to slither through his forearm hair. His suspicion is palpable and he almost says something.

It’s not hard to read this one’s thoughts. He respects the statement I’d made with the bloody nose. The cartwheel was brilliant. And he knows that the Oaks can benefit from a big hitter. But what keeps him from extending the olive branch is wondering how stuffing *this* big got around on his fastball and drove his slider to right. He feels compelled to tell the blond, blue-eyed bastard that lighting him up in front of his boys is the fastest way to get run out of town. But he holds back for now. Spritzing cologne over his unnaturally terra cotta neck and chops, he flosses his limestone teeth, and makes sure that if I’m not deaf now, I will be in short order. When he finally gives the feedback a rest, he lifts a Miller Lite in the same hand as his cig, alternating sips off each.

“You’re built like a middleweight in other places, but it looks like you can’t get your mind off your next cheeseburger.”

Did he just say ‘cheeseburger’? because the two helpings of macaroni did not do the trick.

“Chunk of the Month!” he crows, pointing at my tub, and seems to sign, *Skip a meal!*

“Get off the cancer sticks,” I growl and roll nose-to-wall. I’m wistful for all I’ve left behind: the sacred stack of whacking material, Sook – has she gotten that pickle removed from her forehead? – the VFW legionnaires, all grandpops to me since I never knew my real ones. Christ, what would they think of this? I can see them sucking their toothpicks, furrowing their brows, and ultimately approving, since I swear this is a very temporary situation.

Question: how does one brazen out five and a half weeks at deaf camp? I’m panging hard for the puddling scum between the tires and curbs (and behind the register) at Cheese Stake.

Al accents his all black ensemble with a double dose of white tube socks. I don’t need the door bulb’s blink to see that his overdeveloped upper half is complemented by Number 2 pencil-thin calves. Fighting not to crack up, I decide to get into the spirit of Hill college life, hollering unheard to Al’s back, “Hey, Elvis! It’s for you!”

Then again, is the lusty shape leaning against the doorframe my very own welcoming committee?

I sit up on my cot to memorize Sarah’s wine-red hair, softly upturned nose, and almond-shaped green eyes. I gasp audibly as her boobs almost fall out as she bends adoringly in front of Al, whom she dwarfs, for a kiss. He slaps her bottom like he owns it, and she straightens up and coyly taps him on the head with her feminist book, and they have a laugh. Al motions for me to take a hike. Wanting no part of the moose’s betrayal or my nagging envy, I go for the door, pausing to communicate with a girl my age for the first time in – ages. “Herpes is a disease that attaches to your spinal column,” I assert.

Al chases me the rest of the way out, cawing, “People have lost their lives for less.”

“Still trying to find mine, Al.”

He clutches the surplus under my ribs and spins me. “Hold it there, Chunk.” He cuts his head toward Sarah. “Forget batting practice. If I were you, I’d practice keeping my mouth closed. Which shouldn’t be all that hard, since deaf people *never* rat.”

I wonder if deaf people ever knock each other out. For now I'll save all my swings for the baseball field. Later, Al's bed stops banging the wall, the door opens, and out flies a pillow and covers. I think this is called *détente*.

The good news: the nightly roach-fest hasn't followed me from my former digs as I stretch out under the hall's exit sign. The bad news: I know rock bottom when I'm wallowing in it. "*I have calves*," I say snootily, searching for high ground from the inevitable tsunami of self-pity. Then I close my eyes and try to banish thoughts of how things might've been if my father had made the big game. As always, I lose this battle and the proof is in a big tear that I can't from slipping through the cracks.



Had Thunder shown for the first inning of Princeton's first-ever shot at advancing to the College World Series, things would've gone per usual. You would've looked to the packed stands – two low-slung porches under tin-roof overhangs extending three-quarters to each foul pole. You would've hidden your embarrassment when a teammate points, "Oh-no!" every time the famous cigar dumps ashes on the guy a bleacher down.

In the fifth, you would've sighed happily because the ashes would've started falling between Thunder's knees, and then in the seventh, you would've locked eyes with your pop, and you would've shaken your heads together as he jovially cleared the ash off his tie.

In the ninth, you might've toed the rubber in your baggy wool, instead of packing your spikes neatly in your glove and turning left outside the men's room door.

Chapter 13

At 9am on the first floor of the administration building, you stood with borrowed purpose on the threshold of a high-ceilinged office and look across it, out the cathedral windows onto a quadrangle of lawns and stone paths that lead among departments, dorms, and the library. In the

center of the quad, a maze of rose bushes verges on busting open. Students hurriedly pass. You're ready to be out there with them. If you keep your mouth in check, sign *Hello, I...a...winner, I...love...Hill* twice, and *Goodbye*, you'll be set. Or so you've been told.

The assistant dean of students, Julie Ross, is on the phone, gesturing me toward a couch angled toward her desk and wall of pictures. Or is she inviting me to sit or reacting to the person on the other end of the line? I plunk down in the cushions, draw blood biting off a cuticle, and wait for her to finish her business.

"Of course I want you to be happy, Mother. What kind of a question is that? I've even chosen a profession where I try to help people be happy." Her very attractive brown eyes enlarge. "They have challenges. Being deaf is not a *problem*. No, I realize I'm not deaf. How do I know I'm helping? They tell me. Look, I know this isn't easy to hear from your 24-year-old daughter, but I do know something about love." Her tone turns girlishly sweet. "Yeah, Toby is a sweet-boy. And I'm sure your new guy is too. I'm simply suggesting you love him unofficially. Most of the country still considers marriage a serious undertaking."

The assistant exhales exasperation away from the receiver. This meeting has already taken longer than I hoped and it hasn't even started.

"Mom, I'm sorry," she says. "I'm only saying: in some circles, six husbands might be considered a bit...greedy." Wow, six husbands. At least somebody's having sex.

With a stubborn frown, the voice of doom opens my folder. "I'm running behind – yeah, it's going well. Same old story. We've got our *challenges*. Underfunded, understaffed. But I wouldn't trade this job for anything in the world."

She seems to patiently listen to her mother side while reading through my file. The more she picks at her red nails...

...the more I worry I'll crack. The assistant dean isn't at all what I'd expected. She's in her early 20's with a face pretty enough to make a guy run his hand through his hair for a missed a cigarette butt or some half-chewed food product. She doesn't seem to wear make-up, and she sure doesn't need any to accentuate an expression that is both sexily playful and honest. I'm feeling neither. The wall of pictures shows her in less stressful times eating a Hostess Twinkie on top of a mountain; hanging off a rock hundreds of feet above a desert; standing with a kayak, a tent, and a beard-and-bones who looked like he'd let them starve to death before hunting down dinner. There's also an undergraduate degree in psychology and a graduate degree in social work, both from Columbia University.

Uh, boy.

Social work, alias psychology, is chicken pox for the soul as far as I'm concerned. This I know from personal experience. Once cruising the high of a won Superfecta at Saratoga, I took the advice of the man next to me – who said if he'd ever won that kind of jack at my age he'd have paid a good shrink to keep him from ever coming back to these godforsaken places. So I boarded the bus to some hotshot on Park Avenue. We never once talked about horses, and I staggered out in worse shape than when I went in. Only a kielbasa vendor outside Port Authority could bring me relief.

Suddenly the dean snorts and whinnies in a fashion that must be swiveling the ears of every donkey in Delaware County except those of Kenesaw Bucks. I let the sound wash over me like an acid bath. She's off the phone now, and it's a few constipated seconds before I remember be the provocation of her delight: the two years of ballet in Harold LaMar's transcript. The assistant dean is probably trying to reconcile the images of a thick-wristed, fluffy-sideburned,

beer-bellied ball player sweating his ass off on her couch and the specter of his swaggering insouciantly in tights across her floor. She is having herself a hoot.

Turning her head, she muffles more braying. I feign ignorance. She's suddenly serious as she dings a steel triangle on her desk to my pull attention.

I fake feeling the triangle's vibration and turn to fully face her. The quivering triangle looks like a heart turned on its head.

"Harold LaMar, I'm Julie Ross, the assistant Dean of Students." She elongates her speech so her fingers don't fall behind. "Welcome to Hill College for the Deaf. You've come mighty far."

I cup my hand over my mouth and let my sloth-like posture convey that I've been cruising without a ruder for some time.

"All the way from Texas, Harold."

Yes, I sign and, no...call...Harold...please.

"Okay." She leans forward conspiratorially. "But it is one of my favorite names."

I raise a rogueish eyebrow.

"Potter. Harry Potter." She points at the bookshelf.

"Oy," I mutter. The whole slew is there.

"So is it *Har-ry*?" she chimes. "Or do you go by 'Har' or 'Hal'?"

In the pregnant (last trimester) silence, I clench until my teeth almost shatter, as they do in bad dreams. Singing off-key would be a cinch. Talking like a tone-deaf cowboy is going to take more than natural ability. I conjure Tim McGraw, and it's completely atonal.

"Bucky."

"Butty?"

I sign, *B-U-C-K-Y*.

"Ah. As in lucky."

No...luck, I luck and say, "Family name."

"So what was Texas like?"

Hot, I sign feeling a ray of competence.

"Before junior college in Oklahoma, did you always live in Texas?"

I'm more interested in the book titles on the shelf. There's E.M. Forster, John O'Hara, Bulgakov, Ralph Ellison, Tobias Wolff, Maeve Brennan, and Richard Yates but not the answer to her question.

She dings the upsidedown triangle again, speaks, and signs. "Losing your hearing as a teenager must have been terrible. Not that there's ever be a good time to stop hearing the music. But Beethoven did. Some argue that was when he did his best work. His 9th. You *can* learn how to be proficient at ASL. I see from your transcript that you, too, are an unusually talented guy." She clears her throat of a giggle.

(The forgers had changed Harold's 'B minus' in sign to a 'D minus'. Why didn't fuckin-Willie have them wipe out the ballet while they were at it?)

Assistant Dean Julie says how exciting it will be for me to learn a new language! "Professors and administrators will all sign and speak around you. Even the ones who are hard of hearing themselves. Are you getting my lips? My signs? Am I going too fast? I've only been doing ASL a few years myself. I'm not the greatest."

Yes.

"Yes, I'm not the greatest, or no, I'm not going to fast..."

I'm getting a crick in my neck from trying to keep track of her hands and her lips.

“...which, Bucky?”

Sorry...yes...gotten. I peel my sweater and undershirt from my ribs. A salty pint pools in my navel. This is worse discomfort than the night Justine and I snuck into the woods from a party in high school. The best ten minutes of my life were capped by the sobering discovery we were rolling around in poison ivy.

“Tell me about yourself.”

Baseball...me.

“What else?”

Big shrug.

“I’m a bit of an athlete myself!” She motions at the mountain climbing pictures on the wall. “That’s the Tobester and me at base camp. Took down the snowcaps the very next day.”

Base camp, snowcaps, overnight, bitter cold, body heat, Tobester. Too many layers. I hunt for Julie under all of them, and in one picture, I find evidence of her around the teeth and the large reflector sunglasses that now lie carelessly on the windowsill.

“He’s saving the red-cockaded woodpecker from extinction. Been on the North Cascades for three months.”

“Who?”

“Toby.” *T-O-B-Y*, she signs.

“Your cat?”

“My *fiancé*!” Her bray, nothing short of operatic, stampedes the room. My façade is breaking. Maybe I can raise my hand and explain that bloodcurdling screams are LaMar’s thing. Then I won’t have to worry Julie’s seeing an eyeball dilate. She’s been around that laugh long enough to know that a person has to *be* deaf to *act* deaf around it. Then again, I’ve got meningitis; completely robbed of the ability to hear. I paste on an idiotic grin and stare out the window.

She waves her palm in a high arc, sits back with a mysterious look, pulls her upper lip down over a hiccup, and this time she signs without speaking.

Luckily I recognize ‘*Family*’ and that I’d better tighten up my game. Standing, I hold forth like the front man for Smashing Pumpkins, and this time he I could’ve broken glass. I tell the truth. About my mother and sister living out west now. My sister, I tell Julie, had won the California state high school basketball championship by sinking a jumper at the buzzer. I’d missed it. Julie asks how come, and my head lowers so I can trace the laces on my sneakers. Sweat glosses my curly sideburns. My temples hurt. My stomach rumbles, or is that a thousand whimpers? I feel my face turning red. I lift my watch to cover my eyes and sniff hard a bunch of times.

My vision is blurred, but I manage the sign for, *I...baseball...game...now.*

She says “We have time. The game’s not til three. I checked with Coach Chance. Deep breath.” She takes one. On the exhale, she continues in words and sign, “The right thing is always coming at us. Make yourself open to receive it.”

The door’s five feet. If I open it and don’t stop, my old non-life would be coming at me in less than an hour. So I crouch lower ready for a sprint. When my eyes clears the first thing I see is her long hair falling around her shoulders and down her cleavage as she props her chin with her fist. The grandness of her chest makes me think she must be wide, and won’t stand a chance of collaring me. But before I can bounce, she glides past me to the door and locks it. Her sturdy legs support an apple-shaped bottom that bends a short wool skirt. Her pantyhose can’t dull a splotchy shamrock tattoo near the ankle. The assistant dean would’ve trounced me.

Facing me from the door, she hooks the loose strands of hair behind her ears and flashes a competitive smile. She covered her mouth, and I hear every exhilarated syllable, “We got funding on the line. You ain’t goin’ nowhere, boy.” Speaking and signing, she glides over. “Are you familiar with the tunnel of self-annihilation?”

“Uhhh.”

“Sign, please.”

Outside the window, students are walking and eyeing each other to communicate and avoid collisions.

“How did your family react to your going deaf?”

Mom...him...hers...is...was...never...ever...always...good.

“And Dad?”

Earth...been...good. My bruised fingers throb.

She sits next to me on the couch and delicately touches the purple spots on my hand. That gets my heart going. “Ouch,” she says, then signs and says faintly, “Your dad’s reaction?”

I had rationalized that this gig would not be lying so much as exaggerating. I’d be playing down my “natural abilities” the same way that Major Leaguers understate their use of “supplements.” As she stares at me through those big brown eyes, I feel my throat closing. I cough out the drought. “My dad was a hero. Heroes act. We react to them.”

“So he left you. Not literally – emotionally. How typical.”

“Miss, my father was anything but typical. He could do anything he wanted. Those mountains you basecamp your way up...were nothing to him. You’d never know we were related.”

Insouciantly, she ties her hair back in a loose bun, signs, and says, “Where is he now? The mortgage broker?”

“Mortgage broker? Yeah, now...” The pain cleaves my lungs. My sigh steams the window on the far wall. I hold my cramping side. “...he is gone.”

“I’m so sorry. How?”

The plan had been simple: come to Hill for a few weeks, help Willie out, and thus put an end to “how Thunder went.” I’m not here 24 hours, and this Julie Ross has me starting from the top, dragging me down a deep well (or is it a deep unwell?), from which I shoot up like a stone in reverse. In a hollow voice I don’t have to manufacture I echo the immortal words of one Charlie Potatoes, “Get a life, kid.”

“Well-um-I-oh...I hope I haven’t – gee wizards.”

I can’t see why she’d care, since she’s oblivious to who my actual father. Unlike the bartenders who began a cottage industry by claiming their dump was *the* dump, Julie Ross is sincere. Unlike the vultures, who sweet-talked or bribed their ways into viewings of fuck pads all over town, happy to return to their nests with a souvenir chip of linoleum, the dean is the sort – I have a hunch – that will keep circling.

I knew “The Shh-rine to Cheating!” the moment I saw it. I hadn’t been fooled by the claims made about the first few rooms I’d looked at, and I’m not going to get outmaneuvered by psychobabble. But why does everything have to do with my father, even when talking about someone else’s father? Am I not the one alive?

Bucky?

I turn away from her signing and prowl the room for something to pop. I pinpoint the guy with the beard in some mountain-climbing picture, square in a batting stance, and bash an invisible pitch Julie has to whip her head to follow.

With a look that says, “I’m not done with you, yet,” she smoothes her skirt, unlocks the door, and lets me out to me first baseball game in three years.

Chapter 14

Boyer College, Pennsylvania Dutch country.

Turns out there’s a C.O.D.A. on the other team, who Jenna caught stealing our signals.

During a promising rally in the sixth, Willie crosses up the signs. After giving the old signal to “*sacrifice*” – a tug of the groin – the Boyer infield breaks for home, and Bratty Matty Zernial drills the pitch off the first baseman’s shin. Poetic justice prevails. The ricochet loops into the air; the pitcher snags it, hurdles his supine swearing teammate, and double Hunt off first. We can’t buy a hit. Hiding behind my shades, I sprawl on the end of the bench, like a husband who has had too much shopping for one day. Squirting tobacco juice, I brood over the last time I’ve been in uniform and not broken a sweat.

“That would be uh, *never*.”

In the eighth inning, the sun is a blinking out bulb behind swift-moving linty blue clouds. The scoreboard shimmers, and the chairman of the Biology Department, Professor Robert Goodnight, surveys things from top of the row of the stands like a bored lifeguard atop his station, waiting for someone to start shrieking and gurgling. In fact, there are 9 Oaks in the field, drowning (today, 10-3), before his eyes and all he seems to see is the Gobi desert, expansive and unexplored. If Pamela Anderson bounced by, he wouldn’t notice. This I know because I’ve done some checking and learned a couple things. From the time he hit puberty, the opposite sex’s efforts to bag him have been relentless. Apparently, he blames his hot looks on the berry-picking Bible-thumping commune he called ‘home’ as a boy. But the only bouts of chemistry he’s ever suffered have been with textbooks and test tubes. A confirmed commitment-phobe, he was humbled the day he found his soul mate – in the biology lab, under a microscope; her name was *Drosophila melanogaster*, a.k.a. the fruit fly. Henceforth in addition to creationist theories, he blew off hygiene. By the time Goodnight received his doctorate, his breath was in a league of its own. The most adoring females gave him ten feet, though none could avert their eyes – even when he picked at his scalp and ate the scabs. In Genetics Class, even Al Pagano took copious notes not only on the professor’s hygienic miscues but also on the wispy platinum locks.

Amazingly it is Julie Ross who snaps Goodnight out of his daze, as she comes springing up the stands with a cardboard sign that reads:

DOMINATION

SUPREMACY OAKS!

Laughing, Goodnight gives up his seat to her and hops in his 8-cylinder Oldsmobile.

I glance over at Willie, who is pacing in front of our bench. He's about as glad to see Goodnight go as he is flabbergasted by the nonsense Julie Ross is shaking over her head. Goodnight and Ross seem to be the only two Oak fans on the eastern seaboard.

Willie grumbles, "Why can't the faculty and administration be like the students and forget the college even has a baseball team?"

I spit a lengthy stream of chaw and respond, "Time for your inhaler, Wilbo."

Willie says thanks and takes a hit.

"In case you're wondering," I say to the coach's back as his body fills with ari, "this is the worst baseball game I've ever seen. And that's coming from a lifelong Phillies fan."

Booey forks a dribbler down the third base line and flips it to first to end the inning. As he, Al, and Tisch jog off the field chatting in sign, Al sticks his glove under his armpit, pinches the bill of his cap, flexes his right arm, indicates Julie with his elbow, and signs to Tisch with his left. *Are my arms big?*

Your hair's big, Tisch signs. *Tool: she's here to see if the colostomy bag is fitting in with the misfits.*

When is coach going to fit the colostomy bag into the lineup? Booey's fingers lament.

Tischler glares toward the bat rack where Willie is pumping me up.

The loudspeaker announces Harold LaMar's batting. Says Willie, "Keep your eye on the spy."

"You mean the ball?"

"That babe."

"Which babe?"

In the middle of a bevy of enemy co-eds, Julie stuffs a Devil Dog in her mouth.

"That's my adviser. She's all about the funding. I am nothing but a revenue stream to her."

"Keep it to a single, man, just in case."

"In case?"

"In case she's also advising Professor Goodnight." Willie claps me on the back and sends me in.

I jog the first few steps to the batter's box. I seriously don't know if I can single, let alone make contact against live pitching, but with Julie and all the rest looking on I'm antsy to show them I'm good for more than a cup of fuckin' coffee. I choke-up an inch from the knob and lift the rusty dinger off my shoulder. The umpire points at the pitcher to shoot when ready. While the fielders lean on their knees and blow bubbles, soft blue light trickles from the clouds. A fine sprinkle begins to fall on the country lane behind the brick homerun wall in left.

I was going to watch a few, but the drizzle is sweeping toward the infield and this pitch is busting at the seams. Ticked under it. The ball lifts in a long arc and tracks wimpily toward the dense outfield clouds. It's probably a can of corn, but develops a kind of spurt, so I keep trotting.

Goodnight's Olds is rolling down the tree-shaded lane beyond the field. He's probably grooving on Wagner (not Honus) and mourning the sacrifice of a monarch butterfly on his windshield and that such a creature, so great and small, is now smeared like pancake mix. In this

way the remains of the butterfly will block any view Goodnight might have of the homerun's meteoric plunge into the Olds's hood. Pressed to the glass, the professor will have no idea what hits him.

Barry Bonds has blasted over seven hundred homers in his career and remembers each one fondly, even those hit when he was so juiced he couldn't tell you what planet he was on. What is memorable about this one for me is not the usual – stars shooting through the skin, kids tearing after the ball, teammates hoisting me to the sky – but that only Willie Chance meets me at home plate.

Willie slaps me five. "I know I said keep it on the down low, but Hank Aaron just called and said 'Dayum'!"

The rest of the Hill sideline is unmoved. The team is so populated with geeks I have trouble finding a baseball player among the lapfuls of slide rules and graphs. There are Statistics and World History books. There's Max Weber, *The Medicine Wheel Way of Life*, and Jacques Derrida. A relief pitcher reading *Light In August* dog-ears a page and looks up, annoyed. The balance fuss with their pagers and MP3s.

I motion at the bench. "Caution: athlete in the area."

"It's an egghead school. You could be gone tomorrow, for all they know." Willie lists under his breath, "You're the new man on the totem pole. Punched their chief in the nose."

"If I'd meant to punch him in the nose, he'd still be on his back."

"You refuse to learn how to communicate in the deaf world because you haven't accepted you're one of them. Remember? Burger flipping and all that glamor?"

"What's any of that got to do with giving a bro some skin after a towering poke?"

"They don't get that, man! Most of 'em's fine with being deaf. It's normal to them. I ain't tell you this before. Some of these knuckleheads think being deaf's *better*."

"Guess what, Willie. I think deaf's better too. Every time Alanis Morissette opens her mouth. But I *ain't* fine with last place!"

"They want to win as much as anybody. You're doing a bang-up job. You got the dirtball thing down cold."

"I'm not trying to be—"

"I know – you're a natural. But it wouldn't hurt you to be more LaMar-like."

"Harold LaMar was a ballerina!" I gnash.

"Then twirl."

Tisch pensively watches Willie lavish attention on his rival and appears to be thinking, *So it's not my being deaf he objects to.*

Al seems to be thinking, *Of course he can hit. Son-of-a-bitch can hear, can't he?* He also registers a kind of starstruck envy because he knows his stock is falling on the homefront.

Booey centers his glove on his crotch and signs to Jenna, *I wonder if he throws hard.*

Jenna throws her head back and laughs, red-cheeked.

The ball! Throws the ball hard! Booey signs. He gets up, forgetting about his raging knob and parades with it pushing his pants half a foot from his body – of course just as I'm storming back to the bench. So I catch the face-covered groans intended for Booey and get the double entendre. The Oaks aren't content with being deaf to me; they have to blind themselves, too. The weatherbeaten wooden bench, however, eagerly awaits my arrival. When I thump down, a splinter, classified in some parts of the world as kindling, pierces my left flank. My yelp can be heard in Sri Lanka but not three feet to my right.

The Boyer College pitcher, who like any other kid who from-childhood-up had nurtured no greater wish than to play in the bigs, sees my war cry and knows enough to respect my stroke. (In fact, the scene would come back to him every time he donned a uniform, and drive him to double-major in Chinese and Foreign Relations, graduating with honors and becoming the first person in his family to earn a graduate degree – an MBA from Stanford no less.) He walks the sacks full before finding the strike zone, but none of that seems to mean a thing to the Hill eggheads. The next three are easy outs.

I use one hand to pack my bag and the other to hold my ass from falling off. The soft rainshower has passed with my debut. The sun is out, the temperature rises with my blood. I converse with the only other rational person around, me. *“Thanks for the homerun, Bucky. You’re welcome, dicks. We like being deaf. Well, I’m glad you’re deaf and – that you can hear the beat. But you can’t hear The Beatles. Or The Stones. P.S. Ain’t gawn be no beas’ o’ burden. Where was I? You can’t hear Cake, the ocean, or Billy Ocean. You can’t hear Pink, Pink Floyd, or even a guy named Floyd—”*

“—you can’t either,” Willie growls, tying his Docksidiers.

“—you—”

“—yes?”

“As I reckon we dirtbags would say in Texas: ‘Fuck, ya’ll,” I finish. But I am happy the Oaks can’t hear me either. And later I’ll feel bad for saying all that, even if my tirade has been fueled by the substandard infrastructure of Division III baseball diamonds and the twenty extra pounds that make me sweat buckets in this high humidity.

Julie’s made her way from the stands to my end, knocking the bills of the caps of Schienblum, Doyle, Hartung, McDougal, and Sain – some promising underclassmen.

She jiggles her cardboard sign for the newest Oak. *“Dom-i-na-tion!”*

“They did,” I drone.

“You did,” she signs and says.

“It takes a team, Ms. Ross.” I watch the stubby catcher, Hunt, lead the squadron onto that hearse of a bus, and feel no guilt for copying their accents. *“I should get going.”*

“It really turned into a nice day!” she signs and says. Her half-shut eyelashes make shadows down her cheeks. *“What’s it feel like to be back in the game?”*

“Like this. You’re a sherpa. You’re three-quarters up K-2 and the dentists and lawyers and CEOs want to smear pate and look at the beau voir. It’s a beau voir kinda day. Then night comes...”

“Everybody: pull together.”

“Or leave the recreationers to lose their toes. And their ears.”

“Hmm.”

“We could use your fighting spirit. But I’d lighten up on the poster board until we beat somebody. Thanks for coming.”

I try to scam. She blocks me, signs, and says. *“Thank you for coming. After what I put you through today, I thought I might’ve run you off. The family junk is always hard. I – we’re all glad you’re here.”*

I squeeze the sweat from the ends of my jersey. The inferno in my seat subsides.

She continues, *“There’s a personality test I have all the students take. It’s fun. We do it together. I’ll be working late if you want to come by.”*

Willie’s afro looms high behind her. His hands mince his hair with a pick.

Thank you, I sign to Julie and drone on, “just put me down as a recluse. When I do this kind of shit and I’m around lots of people, I just wanna go back to my cave and be alone.”

“Later in the week then, Slugger.” She pops me on the arm. “And unless you want to see me gack, it’s not Ms. Ross. It’s Julie.”

She swerves away, and I have to agree with her own assessment that she’s “a bit of an athlete.” Getting into those jeans must take serious talent. I raise an invisible bottle to my lips and sigh, “It did turn into a nice day.” And I might catch her looking back at me, if Willie doesn’t step in between.

“Ain’t no *nice day*,” he corrects me. “Ain’t gonna be no nice days until—” the coach twists his pick deep in his afro as if he’s spading up dirt “—I’m goin’ to the championship, not back to—” he cuts himself short with a sick look at the scoreboard.

“Back to what?”

Willie dabs his face with his sleeve. “You’re my future now too, junior. Blow this, and goddamn if the city dump ain’t end up looking like Disneyland. Keep reminding yourself, you’re at Hill for one reason.”

But as Julie bends over to get into her Altima, I can already think of three.

Chapter 15

Al’s snorefests have me working overtime for every minute of sleep I can grab (and also have me slipping in and out of wet dreams about earplugs). Some mornings, making class on time is one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. But having already taken a similar load – liberal arts studies and one science course – at Princeton, I’ve actually started a semester ahead. Stuff from old term papers proves useful for ideas and allots me more time to bone up on signing and to fixate on non-verbal interactions of the professors and students. I’m to where I can understand a lot of sign sentences from context, the same way the deaf kids can read my lips. A virtuoso I’ll never be, but if in the end the Oaks do not win the league – a dream that in the lengthening afternoon light seems ever farther from reality – I can hedge getting caught and getting the press all jumped up about the latest misadventures of Chance and Bucks. There’s also the matter of perfecting my new speaking voice. It grows more authentic each time I wait in the cafeteria food line and hear some band like Blink 182 coming from the kitchen radio. Now before speaking, I make it a practice to hum one of their songs, and I am sure to sound like the Prince of Def.

As anyone knows, there are bars around Philadelphia frequented by athletes and sportswriters. What I learn one evening is that there is one for deaf college students. I stumble across a brittle door in a windowless wall in back of the Middleburg strip by the railroad tracks.

I lay the few bucks Willie has fronted me to the waiter, sit at a table facing a booth of Oaks, and watch the big blonde moose signing his love woes to Jenna. At their table, Tisch and Al half-heartedly produce words to go with the spider webs their fingers made. Equipped with sign dictionary, I am able to piece together portions of the Oak conversation.

No offense, Al. But Republicans are either mean or dumb, or both, Tisch signs.

They have values.

Right in line with your values. Pray to God, and fuck the poor.

Behind exasperated smokeclouds, Al signs, *They are keeping us safe.*

From what? The homos?

Government-sponsored programs. Al cuts his head at me.

Why do you always make it personal?

Because he's here to save you!

Booey signs, *He's kind of a sourpuss.*

Al signs, *He's definitely an acquired taste.*

Tisch signs, *He's a fucking dick! I don't like the way he walks. Head all up—look at me, look at me. And that face. That scar below his eye looks like a wayward rectum.*

You don't like him because he kicked your African-American rectum, Al signs.

Lucky shot. And I'm not African-American. I'm black!

I'm just stating fact.

What, that I need to be saved?

Jenna separates them. As she steams her specs, her eyes shine green and damp like a rainy outfield. The moose gives her his undivided attention. She's about to sign something but notices Al has something more on his mind. She gestures for him to go first.

The school is going to cut the baseball program unless we win the league.

Bullshit, Tisch signs.

Jenna signed, *So that is what coach and President Miller were discussing after the first outdoor practice! I only saw parts of it. How did you find out, Al?*

Shrugging, Al signs, *Lucky shot?*

Tisch signs, *Why wouldn't Willie have said something to us? At least to me?*

Maybe he didn't feel like he needed to run it by you. Maybe he didn't want Captain Goody-2-Shoes to know.

Oh, you mean in case the deaf Babe Ruth suddenly plopped from the sky. Now you're making sense, Al. A deaf kid who hits like that might be big news. Do we know his history? I mean where was this guy a couple years ago when Alice Deal started double-digitting us?

Bagging groceries, Booey signs, then subtly digs an elbow my direction. *Are you suggesting he's not—*

Jenna cuts Booey short, *—exactly like us? You live with him, Al.*

Al puts down his cig. I glare lightning bolts over my sign manual, poised to ring the bell on him and Sarah. I let him read my lips, "Herpes is a disease that attaches itself to the spinal column." He tells his mates, *After the way I sang for him the other night, he's got to be worse off than us.*

Good, Jenna signs. *But frankly I don't care if he knocks over liquor stores, as long as he helps us win.*

Booey and she put their hands together in a sign of solidarity. Al absently taps their hands with his left, but Tischler keeps signing. *Win what? We're 1-8.* He slams the empty beer pitcher on the table, and buzzsaws the air with, "How do you get a beer in this place?"

I had wandered off campus to forget the Oaks, not to become conversation fodder. I go to the can, lock the door, throw water on my face, and piss out a letter in the urinal. “Dear Nikki,” I squirt,” I did not drown. The important thing is – what’s the important thing? Your big brother is on the comeback trail. Back in school. Playing ball. And these guys are not as bad as I thought, considering every pop-up is an adventure.” After zipping up, I eye myself lustily in the mirror and finish the postscript aloud. “And in five weeks I will have taken care of things or broken every school record trying. As long as I’m history before the administration finds out I’m robbing scholarship funds from some needy—” I sigh, “—needier person.”

I leave the men’s room excited to get back between the foul lines. A late-night workout might burn off the suds and settle some nerves. I slow at the kitchen, though, where the waiter is so still so agitated by Tischler’s tantrum, it’s amazing pots and pans aren’t flying. I wait around the corner and peer to see if Tisch is going to get another well-deserved whack in the head.

The waiter snaps at the cook, “I swear, man, these dummies’d drink their granny’s piss if it said ‘beer.’”

“If it says ‘beer,’” the cook replies, “they’ll drink it.”

I lay back on the wall and listen to the unmistakable rush of a double stream shooting into a half-tapped pitcher. The waiter makes the delivery.

“Now what?” I ask myself. I swear I hear Dad whisper, “Come *on*,” and Willie hiss, “No! They’ll live.”

I turn the corner in time for Jenna’s sign, *Have one with us?*

I join up, and before anyone can drink to my arrival or departure, I make my first scoop of the season, gathering all the mugs and pouring them back into the pitcher. Al grins maliciously behind his cigarette. Tisch ripens for round two. Jenna screws her specs to her face. Booeyperspires. I lift the refilled pitcher of piss-polluted beer and say to the waiter, “The first one’s on us.”

“I don’t drink,” the waiter shouts cautiously.

“Do you bathe?” I dump the entire load on the waiter’s trousers. Not wanting anything to do with my ugly scar or swollen fists, he backs away to the kitchen.

Al signs to Jenna, *You okay with assault?*

Tisch sniffs his mug. *Rancid*, he signs. But it’s not clear to his friends if he is talking about the beer or the Oaks’ new shortstop, who walks head-high out of the bar into a hazy brown moon rising over the outfield pickets and a train conductor calling *All tickets!*



What if you had stayed on the mound and Thunder had made it to the game...

You look not for Thunder’s face so much as for anything in it that will make you feel good enough to be his son. “Give him the gas!” the Hall of Fame quarterback would suddenly cry from his third base-side seat, evoking a symphony of fart sounds from the South Carolina dugout.

You would love nothing more than to throw gas, smoke, or serve anything with sauce, only your arm is a rag. You’re willing to bet your fourteen-year-old sister, without a warm-up,

can bring it faster than you can right now. The shock treatment wore off in the sixth; the Celebrex lost its punch in the eighth; and as you back off the hill and count twelve puffy clouds on the horizon where a crow is drawing circles, it's a chore just to wring the sweat from your cap. "Jesus-fuck," you say, and just as quickly eye the earth's blue dome since even the son of a preacher wouldn't be so arrogant as to curse the Lord in the ninth inning. Lifting your cap and whipping your leather across your brow, you want whatever is up there to see every inch of you as you implore, "Sorry, Christ, Jesus, or whatever the hell you go by these days."

There are two down in the ninth.

Princeton's head baseball coach, Tad Rudden, a pure Irishman with a bristly mustache and a soft baritone, winks at you in slo-mo, an action that comes as a reprise of his pre-game pep talk: "Tigers, no need for nerves. We've been down this road before. It's just a game. Go out and play it like any other. And we'll be James Q. Dandy." You hope you won't play this one like the other meaningless championship games you've habitually turned into near misses. They were really just a bunch of late inning flirtations with hard luck - that were always whispered as 3-Mile Island meltdowns, high points including, but not limited to, the 10-and-under Police Athletic League city game, the Little League World Series, and the state tournament in high school.

You pull your cap down, ready for business, but that doesn't stop every one of Coach Rudden's words from banging your skull as if delivered by the keys of an old Smith Corona.

Chapter 16

Having a mailbox is good in case bad news needs to find me. And daily it does in the shape of offers for every kind of credit card under the sun. Even though they are addressed to someone who had left the school long ago and evidently now has the credit rating to charge a deluge, I shred the documents to protect my namesake's identity from other possible thieves. Clearing today's rampage from the cubbyhole, I'm feeling almost grateful to Harold LaMar, when a jab in my shoulder makes me vibrate as though I've been plugged into a low voltage

socket. In her lilac mini and matching tights, Julie Ross is a purple plum. Three plums, to be exact. I want a bite.

“Popular guy,” she says, astonished at the stack of junk mail in my palm. She signs slowly, grinding out the aggravation in her voice. “This is a small campus. Word gets around.”

After Al had gotten back to the room, he asked me, “Have you heard the expression: ‘Criminals want to get caught?’”

I diagrammed, “waiter,” “peepee,” and “beer.” When Al considered how many pitchers he’d downed that could’ve been brewed in some old fart’s bladder, he too felt it prudent to jump on the Bucky-is-deaf bandwagon.

Julie Ross demands, “What did that waiter do to you, Harold?”

The wrong words are coming out. I button my lip and look at her breasts, which are truly amazing, and finally say, “Sure. No problem. He – he called me, ‘Harold’.”

I let her study me.

“Sorry, Bucky,” she says. “Are you familiar with the term ‘denial’?”

Who at this point isn’t in denial?

“I haven’t had the most normal time, okay.”

“Normal?” she laughs. “I don’t mean to sound harsh, but things could be much worse. I’m not saying life isn’t a struggle on every link of the food chain, but you could be living in a dumpster.”

Or waking up next to one, I think.

“Nobody here has had a normal time – including me,” she mumbles the last bit away from me.

“I’ll try not to be such a lowlife,” I say and attempt to sign.

Still looking away from me, she leans on the hood of the junk mail bin and blocks the exit with her hip. Her fingers move dazedly. “Your mother could be getting remarried,” she says dottily.

“My mom?”

“For the sixth time.” She’s acting sort of spaced out.

I haven’t seen Mom in three years, but I doubt, she’s been up and down the aisle that many times, so I get the impression Julie is not talking about me now. More importantly, lunch hour is upon us, and I can’t really think about much other than the cafeteria girls in their brown jumpers heaping my tray high. Then again, how long has it been since anyone asked for my slant on things? I can use an ally. I stroke my chin and say, “It is a quagmire.”

“Viet-nam was a quagmire. We got out. I don’t have that option.”

I figure a grand total of two more compassionate words, and I’ll be on to the chowfest. I wink at the blotch on her ankle, showing through her purple tights, “Sharp tattoo.”

“It’s a birthmark.”

“Sharp birthmark.”

“No one’s ever said that to me,” Julie says, troubled.

I bite my tongue. Next up I’ll probably rave about the gap in her teeth. I motion for her to continue.

She does. “To some people, evidently, variety is the spice of life. Others may want to know that the same person will be there every day when they wake up. And maybe every morning read the paper and drink coffee together.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Rituals.”

Believe me, the girl looks normal – much better than normal – but she’s starting to sound as if she’s been hanging around the mongoloids too long. Coffee and newspapers? These are the kinds of rituals that make human sacrifice sound balmy. I tell my adviser in a deaf-tone and broken signing that who her mother desires to drink or not drink coffee with is her own damn business. Her cheeks flush. Her chest bobs above her top. I make my move and ask her if she’ll join me for lunch.

(If she says yes, I vow internally to never sleep with or have any other intimate exchanges with a dumpster again.)

She pats her shoulder bag and withdraws the personality quiz or “questionnaire” she’d told me about after the Boyer College game. She clears the top of the trash bin, so that we can fill out our own. She tells me to check each question that’s true.

The list isn’t long and is full of things I’ve never asked myself.

I tend to be shy or uneasy with strangers. Dumping beer on a stranger isn’t shy but probably puts me in the uneasy category. *I’d rather be at home than going out on an adventure.* Although I haven’t been “home” in three years, I did tell Julie I was a recluse. *I wish I were smarter.* Who doesn’t? *I often wish I were better looking.* I pinched two thick inches at my waist and brush a fallen hair off the printout.

True, true, true, true.

So far I have a perfect score. She was right. This is fun. She looks up from her test and smiles at my progress. I add three more trues to *I have a hard time saying no. I often feel guilty. I hate to be unprepared.* But I don’t want to dominate too much. She might think I’m cheating. The last bunch of queries cooperates. *I’m too cautious.* Yeah, right. *I rarely take risks.* Huh! *I second-guess everything I do.* Not lately. *I hate the way I look in pictures.* Hate might be an overstatement.

I’ve answered true to seven.

She says, “Wow,” and that she’s only checked off four.

I shrug sympathetically.

She takes out a book and diagnoses the results. She signs and says, “Yes to seven indicates a moderate level of insecurity.”

“A what?”

“The book says your insecurity is probably undermining your capacity for effective and successful living.”

That’s a theory I might consider exploring only since she has a lower score. “And yours?”

“With a four, I have a *tolerable* degree of insecurity. Nothing to worry about.”

I scan her sheet. “You had a lower score.”

“Lower score, fewer neuroses.”

“You don’t wish you were smarter or better looking?”

“Excuse me?”

“My answers were honest.”

“I’m sure they were. And they indicate a moderate level of insecurity. It’s not bad, Bucky. It’s just not as good as me.” She winks and goes.

Now I have to have her. In finely-tuned static, I call, “What about lunch?”

She turns, skirt flouncing around her, signs, and says, “I like to eat my food. Not wear it.” Her bray shatters the glass in three mailboxes. The hallway shakes as if a train had just ridden through.

“Oh, like I’m the psycho,” I say below the ringing in my ears.

But I’m not too broken up about it and explain to myself that this is for the best because if she suddenly starts liking psychos and I start liking uptight administrators, no doubt my reward would be weekly baby showers and Julia Roberts/Reese Witherspoon/Meg Ryan weekends. Her spine-tingling cacophony becomes an echo to Willie’s warning that he’ll make the city dump look like heaven on earth if I foul this up. In fact, I decide, if need be, I could grow to hate her.

Yet love still wakes me every night if not in the frantic pawing silhouettes of Sarah and Al, in the song that still stumps me from the oldies station at Cheese Stake.

...and they whirl and they twirl and they tango...

...singing-a, dinging-a dango...

...float like the heavens above...

...Looks like muskrat luh-uh-uh-uh-uhve...

...uh-uhve!

The only way to get rid *uhv* the tune, short of chopping off my head, is to follow Al’s advice and ‘take a hike’ and tramp along the creek. There, I get light-headed on the thick fragrance of the magnolias, scale their trunks, swing apishly from limb to limb, and pull down every starry bloom. I build a fluffy bed of them for these first restless nights in Middleburg, in a small clearing surrounded by bushes on the far side of the creek.

When I finally feel I can get a peaceful night’s rest in the dorm, I bundle up all the blossoms and leave them anonymously at Julie Ross’ office door.

Chapter 17

Yesterday we killed the last place team in Alice Deal’s division. I racked up 6 RBIs on 4 hits, and if only I’d stopped at first base on one of them, I would’ve hit for the cycle. Today, President Miller drops by practice to congratulate Willie. “On a roll,” she says.

“One win in a row ain’t no roll, Elaine.”

“Around here, it’s a streak.”

By the middle of the next week, the Oaks move into a tie for fifth place in our division, up from sixth. We make hay of the weaker teams on the schedule. Al and the rest of the staff are stingy on the mound, so my input is all the more handsome. After looking like a one-legged ballerina in my first start – to the ex-shortstop’s delight and Willie’s consternation – I’m solid up the middle, when not sucking up anything that rolls through Booe’s legs at third. And true to my earlier words to Willie, I baby as many throws as possible so as not to call unnecessary attention to my arm. Tisch, eager to get his old position back, plays a brilliant second. But I’m still leading a one-man brigade at the plate, having multiple extra-base hit games, knocking every

kind of pitch between the outfielders and several times hitting something they can only turn and watch. It's not because my efforts are frighteningly divine that my acreage at the end of the Oak bench increases. It's not because I'm hard to "talk" to that the Oaks practically double-up on each other's laps in to avoid an accidental brush with or against me. No. I scare the living Christ out of the sane only because I've survived nearly two weeks living with Al. I'm this raw super-id whose mystery and spontaneous unpredictability is both rousing and nerve-wracking to the Oaks. So it seems strange after an unembarrassing infield practice before a game with the second place team in our division, the Senators, when most of the squad down the line playing pepper, the moose they call decides to mingle. Stretching his hamstrings on the ground, he looks up with something to say.

I don't know what to do. I've already made up my mind I have nothing in common with these kids. I don't follow reality TV (or anything resembling reality these days), and they obviously don't play the radio game. What else is there – chicks? Can't say I keep up with them – or they with me – either.

Booey nods at the ball of tobacco in my cheek.

What's it do?

I get the gist. "Makes you feel like a ball player, Moose. Unless you swallow it."

What then?

"Your face turns into a pea. You spend the next 17 hours wishing you'd never met me."

Booey adds crackle to his signs. "I'm already glad I met you."

"Really?" I lower my shades to make sure this isn't another stunt. You just can't trust these kids.

The moose mouths, "Yeah. You seem okay."

"Where you from, Moose?"

"Minnesota."

"Figure skater?"

He shakes his head.

"Bet you can shovel snow like a motherfuck."

He grins.

"Booey. Is that a deaf person name?"

"You should know," Booey smirks. "They named you Becky."

"*Buck-y*. As in *Fuck-y*. How'd you get Booey?"

Booey explains that he came about his muscle mass and acne the old-fashioned way, unlike the way he acquired his name. As a boy, he was so physically imposing his six older siblings would only let him play Aint No Boogies Out Tonight if he was the monster. In chilly piss-in-your-pants dusks, getting eaten alive by mosquitoes, he'd wet himself then swoop through the high central Minnesota wheat bellowing *boooooo*. Those warbling shrieks and the nickname they drew were about as close as Booey came to meaningful interaction with others since not even Mom or step-dad made an effort to learn ASL. After many tearful failures at trying to fit in, Booey accepted that people weren't overly concerned with him. Then one day in the sixth grade, he came across an ad for a deaf school in Wisconsin. His parents immediately offered to drive him to the station, but he rode his bike and left his wheels to a sad-looking boy throwing pennies on the tracks.

"That's not an uplifting tale," I say.

"They didn't know what to do with a deaf kid. We're all good now. My parents may come down for a game. Where's your family?"

“Aw, you know how those things go. People change. Move away.”

“They haven’t dealt with the problem, have they?” the moose says.

“I think *they* have.”

“How about you? What do your ears miss most?”

“The usual. Car alarms. Leaf blowers. Leaky faucets. Thunder.”

Booey grins unwittingly. “For someone who hasn’t been deaf long, you’re good with lips.”

“That’s what she said.”

“Who?”

“No one. Ever. Really. What’s up with you and the red?”

“Me and the rod?”

I cut a set of curves from the air.

“Oh. Sarah. We went out once. I loved her into hating me. Geminis,” he says, as if that explains it.

I cringe at how Sarah had stooped to kiss Al’s smarmy lips. “A bat and a glove is all you need. The bat is your wife. The glove is your girlfriend.”

Booey ponders desperately. “Maybe she would reconsider – if we win the league.”

“Then start believing we will.”

The Oaks come over in ones and twos, and Booey quickly adds. “That was some homerun. How did it feel?”

“Like having Brittny Spears.” I give Booey a ball of tobacco and a peace sign and botch something to the effect of,

Now...spank...one...so...you...can...keep...hanging...out...at...this...end...of...the...bench.

Booey stuffs the tobacco in his cheek and signs, *Makes you feel like a ball player. What else?*

“You’ll see,” I chuckle.

And Booey does. He sees much better. The tobacco stretches his cheek and opens his batting eye. The nicotine waters down his nerves, just in time for the Oaks’s road trip. The balls come in big as gourds, and Booey sprays them into the gaps, even getting to second base a couple times without having to call a cab. While Willie is loving this turnabout, he’s an empiricist (“a what?”) by nature and says, “Tell me what the fuck is goin’ on. Used to be the kid could hit the ball twice and it’d never leave the infield. Used to be we was gonna legally change his name to Rally Killer.”

I too am feeling the unbelievable rush from stringing victories together, especially since the Oaks, including Willie, don’t seem to know dick about the game. Of course my being a baseball genius and all, when Willie flicks the swell of tobacco in my cheek and asks, “What’s in that stuff,” I don’t patronize. I shrug behind my shades and say, “Drugs, man.”

“Let’s see.”

“Don’t swallow it.”

Despite the warning, by the end of the game the coach is weaving under the home team’s bleacher stands in death throes.

I follow him and hold him up by the back of his jersey. “Trying to lose weight, Wil?”

We gasp, though I’m on the brink of life and he teeters on the brink of death. “You must be going out for the wresting team then, Wil?”

“I used to play with very large, fast black men!” Willie coughs between heaves.

“Were you some kind of perv?”

“This is your blame, Bucks.”

The backs of my hands have brassy-gold hair like dad’s. They don’t even feel like mine as I pull Willie up. “Sorry, Willie,” I say. “Sorry for saying, ‘Don’t swallow it.’ Because I shoulda known you wouldn’t listen to me. You only listen to your own dipshit ideas.”

But we win again. And at the end of the game, though Willie is still picking gunk from his teeth, he signs and shouts to his flock, “Death visited me today!”

The Oaks roar with teary laughter.

“No! For real this time.”

The Oaks howl.

“And He said there’s one more thing He wants me to see before He takes me: Oaks in the championship! Are you down with that? OAKS IN THE CHAMPIONSHIP!”

Then, except for me and my rival, the team swirls in this joyous current of energy. My periphery tells me that Tisch is alone and as far away from it as I, and how he wishes He would make one of us disappear. I gather Tisch’s latest hurting must’ve come when Willie was losing his lungs under the home team’s bleachers. Tischler was running sprints, up and down the foul line, like a bat out of hell to catch the latest wrenching episode of the Willie and Bucky show.

He has to be wondering what I’ve been doing that he hasn’t to merit such fraternal attention from Don Cornelius. I’m sure the delusional bastard might conveniently forget that the differences in his and my batting averages are give-or-take 400 points. One day when Al grabbed a hunk of my love handles in the locker room and signed to those in back, *My Roll Model*, Tisch laughed until his stomach was sore. So even though the Oaks are surfacing from their ancient depths as a team to beat, which brings feelings of pride Tisch has never known before, he stubbornly refuses to slap my back. In fact, the more the team wins, the more conflicted Tisch seems to become, sometimes driving himself to demonic tears of joy when his eyes dart from me to the silo dome (imaging the Bucky swan dive), sometimes grudgingly sighing in recognition that the unwelcome competition has spurred his game to a higher level. When Tisch is at bat, the ball must become my head, the hide my cheeks, the stitches my mouth sewn shut, the Spaulding logo my starburst scar. In these liberating moments, he occasionally clubs the sphere with abandon. Similarly, in his subordinate role at second base, he shivers with the bat’s clong and is impatient to caress the ball’s bruises before chucking it away to Zernial at first.

Everything has its price.

The Oaks’s homecoming, a groggy afternoon affair, is knotted at three in the sixth inning. The other club, the Robertson Rams, a perennial middle-place finisher, is loaded with big, healthy athletes training to be overweight, ass-spanking softballers. Willie knows the type from the foundry. The game is a must-win for the Oaks, not just for extending our streak to 7 straight, but also for posting a .500 record. Willie’s starting to believe; the previous night he’d told Arminta that if the Oaks could cap these two milestones at home might it might stoke the Oaks’s belief in themselves as well and allow them to claim the old farm as *their* property.

With a Ram runner on first, Willie motions us infielders to pull up for the double-play.

Elaine sidle up and teases (loud enough for me to hear at short), “You sure about that, Coach.”

“Watch,” he turns to her and says.

Elaine jutted her chin at me. “How does the Panhandle poet play with his new pals?”

The answer comes as Tischler handles a high chopper and waits to make the flip until the runner is about to wipe me off the bag at second. Though spread-eagled and headed for the dust, I make the 4-6-3 exchange to retire the side.

Elaine emits a gasp, a sound Willie has never heard out of her before.

"We're working on it," he says to her. But the truth is that the only person who helps me up is the runner who'd laid me out.

At the bench, I grab Tisch and sign, *Score...even*.

Tisch signs, *Blow my black knob*.

In the ninth inning of the same game, with the Oaks trailing 8-7, Booeey leads off with a single. Tisch walks. A passed ball to Snooter McDougal allows the Oak runners to advance to second and third. After Snoots goes down looking, it's my turn at bat. I've clouted the ball all day and now I want to put one up in the trees and marvel at their resolute beauty. I look to the vacant stands and wish the assistant dean of students were there to see how a real man could save the environment.

But with first base open, the pitcher lobs the ball way outside, starting the intentional walk process. I call time. I suggest a squeeze play to Willie and Jenna, because if Booeey gets a good lead and goes on the wind-up, the Ram pitcher will have to put the ball near the plate, since a pitch too outside won't give the catcher time to dive back and tag even the lumbering moose.

"Now you wanna bunt?" Willie signs and says.

"If they don't throw it over, I can't hit it."

Jenna spits a gob of chaw, nods in support, and the coach grudgingly agrees.

The runners take walking leads. I choke up on the stick. The Ram coach calls time and gathers his infielders on the mound. From the first base coaching box, Jenna reads the Ram coach's lips, which say, "Might be a suicide. If he squares to bunt, stick it in his ear."

She signs to me, *Heads up!* Although I tip my batting helmet in acknowledgment, every ass-picking, nail-biting Oak thinks I'm clueless. Al almost halts play but reaches in his pants for a Newport instead, probably surmising that a concussion might do their Roll Model some good. The pitcher winds. Booeey and Tisch go. The ball hisses at my skull. Willie munches on the silver cross Aunt Odessa had proudly slung around his neck after Willie's confirmation. During his tour of the eastern Pennsylvania penal system, the amulet was his tunnel from what had been to what could be. On nights when there was no moon in the six-inch window, he slept with the cross between his lips. Now he kissed it, hit his knees, and in a moment of sadistic rapture boomed, "Vouchsafe thy blessings, we beseech thee, O Lord, upon this deaf school and into that cocky little fuck's *big mouth!*"

Unfazed by the wild commotion, I simply turn the bat perpendicular, block the Lord's blessings by blooping the ball over the charging infielders onto the pitcher's mound. Booeey thumps the plate for the tie. By the time Willie waves Tisch in, the coach is eating dust. The Ram coach tramples his cap as though putting out flames. Blue-nosed and breathless from showering obscenities at his infielders, who are crowding around the ball, still spinning up dirt on the mound, he inhales deeply and roars, "What are you gonna do? Go home and tell your friends you lost to Hill?"

The Oak bench pours forth for a warrior's welcome. I wait behind Tisch and Booeey. But they turn around when they get to me. As the Oaks return to the bench, mauling Tischler and Booeey, I take a deep breath and refill with emptiness, my high five wilting sadly.

Willie tosses Thunder's gold chain and pendant into my raised palm. "That was a huge win! Look at them!" Willie punts his foot at the joyous Oaks.

I hum through my teeth, “So now I’m your boy again.” I slip the pendant around my neck and pull the golden noose under my jersey where no one can see.

“The plan’s working,” Willie says.

“The plan might work better with Tischler in center.”

“I’ll talk to him about the buddy passes.”

“That’s not it, Willie. Remember how fast you were?”

Willie blushes, “Uh – who doesn’t?”

“That kid’s faster.”

Willie’s nostrils spread like ink stains. “I’ll tell you what we’ll do, Bucks. I’ll coach. And you play.”

The sun’s a mustard drip on the horizon, so I go to dinner, and the Hill College Oaks, at the midpoint of the season, step into fourth place for the first time in a decade.



If Thunder had been sitting where he should’ve been, you would’ve faced Pee Wee Cox, one more time in the 9th, as South Carolina’s clean-up hitter towers over the dish.

Cox is about to be the Indians’ first-round draft choice. He’s straight off the farm with a chin so prairie-flat you could deal 7-card stud on it and have room for a bowl of chips. There are rumors Pee Wee’s father, a farmer, had mated with an apple tree, and 9 months later amid a bumper crop, a mutant was born. The name Pee Wee came later, when the boy grew six-and-a-half feet high (of which not an inch is neck) and nearly as wide.

From the far end of an orchard he might appear normal size. Unfortunately the space that separates Pee Wee and you is not wide enough to create the illusion. It takes all of your self-control not to blatantly guard your own fruit.

Pee Wee’s bat thuds the outside corner of the plate, and he smirks at the dusty plume settling in the strike zone. He’s overdue for a hellacious blast. So far the NCAA’s hitting and slugging percentage king has collected a grand total of zero hits on the day. But the game has granted him one more life. Now, swizzling the bat like a cocktail straw and planting his feet even with the corners of the plate, he sits into a deep squat, ready to murder your offering. When he spits through the large gap in his teeth, the stream floods an ant colony.

You correctly guess that everyone is thinking you’ve used up your miracles keeping Pee Wee in the yard thus far. So you, freshman hurler, crunch your teeth, rear back, and prepare something a farm boy can dig – a watermelon at the whiskers.

The breeze from Pee Wee’s swing lifts your cap.

“Stee-riке,” the umpire says to the ligament crackles in your shoulder.

Pee Wee mutters, "Dew-huh-what-now?"

Your mom smiles at you the way you wish your girlfriend Justine would, instead of sipping her iced tea and trying to keep the wind from blowing her long blonde hair around.

Your sister, Nikki, mouths, "You are the man!"

And if Thunder were up there, you might watch him get blindsided by something big and bewildering – something that might make him give up the cigars for good, hug and kiss his wife and daughter like he can't let go, and cry out, "My boy! My boy!" until the man in front asks him to please shut up.

Chapter 18

During the hour after dinner, instead of agitating my post-nasal drip in the pollinated zephyrs winding along the creek, I take up Assistant Coach Jenna Woods's offer to tutor me in ASL. She is so appalled at my graceless signing she doesn't seem to notice how hard I'm trying to closet the reason for my lack. She teaches me simple grammar usage, baseball jargon, and the fundamentals of getting along, which, I make sure, includes romantic topics. Blushing, she concedes she knows about as much as I do in that department. But I learn as much from her mannerisms as I do from anything else, and I begin to look forward to these meetings. Though far from fluent, I'm developing a (microscopic) level of comfort in ASL.

One afternoon in Economics, during a sign debate between the professor and a sexy blonde that's showing a knee like Justine used to in a strappy sundress, I snap my pencil in two. Has Justine gotten hitched to the guy she'd described as a friend, the Fitness Magazine model-cum-quarterback for Duke? I grind my teeth as I recall a freshman-year road trip to see my old flame. She'd dragged me to a frat party where pretty boy was all, "Hi Justine, hi Justine." He couldn't even look me in the face until I finally helped him out. "I'm Justine's boyfriend. Who the fuck are you?" That blew the whole trip, of course, because Justine just didn't get it. We made up by phone, and I went along with her clinical, practical style, though my heart continued to blister my ribs. And by the time I'd retired the side in the eighth inning of the NCAA Regional Championship game several weeks later, and took off for Dad's cabin without so much as a forwarding address, I knew I'd already lost her.

Having no love around and no money was scary – goddamn bleak is what it was – but there is no predicting fate. Later I felt somewhat compensated for my emotional loss because the snake hooked me up with three years of lousy passes and game-day decisions when I loaded up on every other team in the ACC, thus helping with various and sundry financial holes. Justine with another guy, especially an unmitigated jackass, still grates me. Only I can't say if her being with someone likeable would be better or worse. All I would like to know is that she still cares – if she ever did. By now she probably can't remember my face. I curse my hard luck of falling

for a woman with no heart. I close my eyes and blame everyone from my parents to Hugh Hefner when suddenly I smell something sugary on the air. It's coming from the window and it carries me back to when I was a boy and my own bedroom window would be plastered with plum tree blooms in early spring mornings.

I stagger, demented, from the study circle to the window and see a plum of the same variety in the courtyard below. Under its white cloud of petals, Julie Ross walks in circles, trying to get a signal on her cell phone. "Say again. What? When? Toby? Toby? Toby?" She looks up and locks eyes with me. The timing is perfect for a sign phrase Jenna taught Bucky.

Are...you...stalking...me...Ms....Ross?

The chalkboard eraser that thuds my head persuades me back to my seat and gets a big laugh out of Julie Ross and my classmates.

A few hours later, I see Julie again. As I cross the parking lot to baseball practice, Julie and a student are rappelling off the silo. The dexterity she and her climbing partner use in manipulating the rope is fascinating. I'd like to watch longer but there's something even more riveting happening on the field. I take a seat in the bleachers.

The Oaks had formed a diagonal line from third to first across the pitcher's mound to observe Tisch tilling the outfield sod. With a Twizzler drooping from the side of his mouth like half a Fu Manchu, he backhands a rising drive in deep left center, then dashes in shallow to scoop a bleater. While Tisch flips his latest catch to the accumulation of balls behind second, Willie uses two hands to scratch his beard. He instructs Al to get a bat and stroke high flies to the areas vacated by Tisch as he speeds after Willie's blows. There are several back-to-back pokes that bring Tisch in, out, and to both sides. He gets them all, and finally exhausted, falls to his knees after a diving belly-flop of a grab.

Al drops his bat and hollers, "Uncle, uncle."

I clap so hard my fingers throb all over again.

Willie isn't done. He gropes his windbreaker and fishes out the ball I'd flung into the Tastykake billboard. He cranks the ball deep to center.

Tisch totters on legs too tired to get back to work, but his spikes seem to find purchase. In strengthening strides he pumps toward the chest-high slats in center. The way Willie's tongue hangs, you'd've thought he was the one doing all the running. The Hillies themselves dash to the outfield's edge for a closer look, then arch and sway as if anything worth hoping for is riding on this play: self-esteem, respect, any stab at being ordinary. Some point at the spinning dot while Tisch tears against the breeze. I want to shout, "Stop!" fearing the kid is in for an impalement or worse on the fence's sharp pickets. And as if heeding my silent warning Tisch hits the brakes seemingly ready to let the dove-like floater go with all the other ones before it. But he's merely sidling up to the pickets and groping for the right handle to jack himself at the soft blue sky. Stretched thin, his body leaps to a great height, and in a single swipe the glove pulls down the ball. In the old barnyard, there is a victory celebration like no World Series ever saw. Tisch rides his teammates' shoulders. I can't wait to tell Willie I told you so. Because now that the Oak outfield and infield are sured-up, we can make a serious run.

Willie trudges to the bench, gets an orange slice.

He eavesdrop on him speaking through the orange rind, "If I could use that boy's lungs to carry me from my felony, if the kid could hear the crack of a bat, or if we could gets these defective parts workin' together, we'd make a run all right – at something better than a no-name meadow in the middle of nowhere that no one cares about or comes to see. Which leaves Bucks sittin' pretty, snatching my team away from me; a Bucks is back, runnin' the show, his whole

white life spreading before him.” (Later, I learn that he last words Thunder had uttered to Willie were, “Whatever you think of me, William Chance, whatever you’d like to blame me for, remember this: If I don’t throw that pass, you can forget about going down in the books as the shortest man in the NFL. About the best you can hope for is that special employee parking space at Grills Galore.”)

Willie slouches on the bench, probably thinking about Aunt Odessa’s pulled pork with slaw.

“What you doin’?” I pipe anxiously from behind.

“You’re looking at it.”

“Want a pillow?”

“Just run practice while I sort some things out.”

“Like telling Bucky he was right?”

“Get the fuckin’ bongo.”

“Willie got outrun by a deaf kid!”

“That ain’t any old deaf kid.”

“Oh right. He’s special. He can hear a Division III second baseman hock up loogeys.”

“He is fuckin’ special. He’s—” Willie rises in protest, then sits back under his cap.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

“What do you think I’m doin’ here, Bucks?”

“Not helping us win games.”

“Is that all you see? Mr. Little Picture rides into Philly. From no-*where*. Drags my ass to the Cheese Stake. What are *you* doin’? *Other* than helpin’ us win games?”

Like an anaconda swallowing an antelope, my throat widens around something still too big to make the pass. Jenna slowly drums the bongo. Humping out to the pitcher’s mound, I feel the blockage in my throat soften. My voice quavers, but I don’t have to rely on it to sign and say, *Thank you*, to the circling-up players.

Then the insults fly.

Tub-be or not Tub-be and *Hazardous Waist*, Al and Tisch sign. They grin encouragingly at those in the back, and seek support, but get none.

With the numbers on my side, I point at the two hecklers and say, “I know what that means.” But dusk is fast approaching and I lack the ability to sign the words that need to be said. As my hands go forward into the future and over my shoulder to the past, verb tenses unable to stay in the present, I see in every eye twitch and burp, in the restless shuffling from foot to foot, the lost looks, and the slumping dreams, a none-too-flattering portrait of my own cowardly detour. My fingers pause as the train pulls in. And I see myself looking out a window and wondering what the next stop will bring.

Al sneers his obvious disgust, and I’m ready to let the bastards rot.

What I soon find out, though, is that the Brooklyn-bred pitcher is deeply sensitive to the challenges of mastering ASL verb tenses; Al had gotten his own share of abuse when learning the deaf language. His look of scorn is for himself and Tisch, and he eloquently expresses it by leveling his partner with an elbow to the ribs.

Al comes forward, faces the Oaks, and clears the air.

In case you haven’t noticed, our new teammate is not much of a signer, but he is excellent at clubbing things.

Al shushes my hands before somebody loses an eye.

He acts like a dickhead and then gets mad at everybody else because he acted like a dickhead. He may not be the picture of mental health, but he's really trying to be nice.

The starters straggle to their positions. Jenna fingers Snooter McDougal, the ropery slick-fielding utility man from the deaf high school in Nebraska – who had started the season in the infield – to plug the hole Tisch left at second as he hobbles out to center.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Bucky mouths to Al.

“Nothing like feeling like a ball player once in a while. Beats feeling like the simpleton at table six.”

“Then stop throwing like one.”

Al leans off his toes, eye-level with me. “There you go again, LaMar.”

“Al, I’m saying you got the goods. Your release is too high. Look...” I demonstrate showed how to lengthen his stride, bend at the waist, and push off the rubber. “You’re down. You’re boom. You’re go!”

“What’s the difference?”

I send him to the plate and throw three by him in the time it usually takes Al to push his shirt creases inside his belt. The last throw pounds Hunt’s mitt worse than any ball that had hit the unprotected parts of the catcher’s body, which was saying something, since the Oak catcher leads the league in plunkings. While Hunt plunges his palm in the cooler of Gatorade, Al finally coaxes his bat into motion, jabbing it at the dirt spot on my knee. “Dirty,” he says, confronting me again on the mound.

“It scraped the ground, Al.” I brush my pant leg. “If you did this after every pitch, you might strike somebody out.”

So Al lives with the dirt, and the Oaks go on a tear. He stops serving up gophers, keeps more balls on the ground, and works out of jams. He also rings up a few. He lays off the cigs so he lasts longer than four innings, quits snoring and hacking, and I start sleeping through the night. From top to bottom, the line up (except Booeey, who got mired in a slump after reading some horse-dingle about tobacco chew causing tongue cancer) is finding new ways to get on base, move up runners, and heap runs by the bushel onto their baffled opponents. The Hogs, Mules, Scorpions, and Cyclones, whose contempt for Hill had redefined the word “deranged”, now, after hot-dogging infield drills, wash down their afternoons with the Oaks’s bitter sap. We’re not out of the woods, but we claim sole possession of third place. It’s fun beating up all the foes. And most importantly, the Crusaders, the foest of them all are not that fo’ from view.

I haven’t forgotten the 2x4 lodged in my bung. How can I? It rages, but I’d be a nimrod to go to the Health Center where they might run God knows what tests on the rest of me. So I play wet nurse to myself. Still, all the soaking-hot baths in the world can’t manage to evict it. So I just accept this is an inconvenience I have to adapt my “lifestyle” around. I stop getting fourths at meals and do jazzercise nightly by the creek until my blob loses two horizons and I can again slide headfirst (without bouncing) on close calls, a maneuver I’d derided in my former life as flashy and unconventional. After my third flop in a game against the Ohio College of Pennsylvania Comets, Willie must suspect I’m stashing drug vials in my back pocket. Because after a bases-clearing triple, Willie spansks me so hard Bucky I end up seeing stars for a week, and then fall into a miserable depression. Although I’m fuzzy on the particulars that have led to my 3-year exile, I have to admit I now derive little consolation after Oak games, sitting at my locker long after everyone else has left, my armpits humming like the crackling air duct of the flop room above B A. Utterly isolated and alone, I wonder if there is something very wrong with me. A big fat crack down the middle, oozing sinking helplessness.

Flat on my back on the locker room floor, I compose postcards to Justine to thank her for the thoughtful emails she gave up sending two years ago.



If Thunder is up in his usual spot, licking his cigar, he'll nod as you ask the ump for a new ball (someone snipes, "Aah, why not go for the pair?"). But Thunder won't know that your mind is squarely focused on somebody else's father. Justine's. The guy despises you, not in the classic sense of having to spectate as some urchin angles to bang his little girl, but for things he wants for his daughter that are tougher-acquired. His strategy plays out in slick and indifferent overtures such as, *That Kenneth ('Kenesaw, Dad!')... sure is a sweet kid for such an unusual pedigree, or, Life will never get dull with a high-risk investment.* His comments are always calibrated to grind things to a halt when you honk out front.

"What kind of asshole thing is that to say to your kid? And how exactly am I different from the other anglers?" you all but yell at Pee Wee.

"Dew-huh-what-now?"

"Not you. Nothin'. No."

Coach Rudden, and the Princeton catcher, Urdansky, share a look.

From under your cap you scout the planks where Justine is sitting with the Bucks family. She's probably bushed from yesterday's drive up from Duke, and her dependably heart-stopping smile is flat. But if Thunder were there, you would be thrilled to watch her lavish most of the attention on your father, because it would mean he hadn't left the building. Her eyes probably wouldn't squint speculatively past your shoulder, as if she's looking at what's about to happen. You wish that you could stop the game and tell her that the future isn't back there. But you can't. Because the longer you rubs the new ball, the more you feel like you're polishing lead.

"Let's go, Pitch," the ump says.

Your spikes hook the rubber, and you see what Justine can't: that if you get Pee Wee, the Homecoming King and His Queen will be together to hear her father call him "son." You windmill your throwing arm and move your hand in a slow circle over the glistening #12 pendant hanging to the opening in your jersey. You throw, and this time you get help from Pee Wee, who chases a curveball that bounces.

"Strike two," says the umpire, and the Princeton fans, on their feet, call out "BUCKY! BUCKY!"

You are deaf to the chanting. The pain throbs from your shoulder joint to your ears.

Chapter 19

I never get around to writing Justine, though it seems like there's no bottom to my plummeting dumps, no end to the summery days made for baseball, no ceiling to the team's rising confidence, no limit to their flamboyant disregard of me. On one such day as the innings tick away, at the bat rack, I growl, as Booeey steals my only tangible claim to the team, the spot at the end of the bench, "Only notice when I'm not around. Something worth – *considering*."

Booeey opens up the Hill College News and signs to Al, *Have you noticed whose name is in the paper?*

Al finds the blurb under an ad for Beltone Hearing Aids. He translates into sign, *Blah-blah-Bucky Lamar...blah-blah-blah-LaMar... 'the only chink in the Oaks' rejuvenated line-up is Booeey Raines, who after a Herculean performance on the road, at home couldn't hit his way out of a wet paper bag.' What's the matter with you, other than the usual? You have martinis for lunch, Boo?*

Sarah, Booeey signs, entranced.

Sarah? On an island, maybe. In a cave. In a hallucinogenic dream state.

Al ditches him and proceeds through a dense cloud of what benchwarmers do best. Luke and Jerry Covalowski's gas contest rolls like a wheel of Gruyere in front of the bench. Al voices his displeasure, "The problem with baseball games is not having to compete against clowns with twice the attitude and half the game of 'LaMar'," Al makes quotation marks around my alias and finishes his thought, "so much as having to hang out with stupid motherfuckers for three hours."

Jerry backhands a fart at Al as he passes and signed to his brother, *I like to at least get a reaction.*

Al turns and signs, *If the wind blows down this end, you're going to get a bat!*

The Covalowskis high-five. They can cut the cheese like nobody's business.

On a knee in the on deck circle, I wax nostalgic for days when my own peers noticed me long enough to jest or tussle. There is a party going on in the land of the ungratefults and my invitation has not been forthcoming. This is hard to swallow, but I am not the type to knock and beg for admission. Plodding to the dish, I tell myself to *try harder*. The wind flicks dew off the branches and makes little explosions of butterflies. A single cloud above left slides across the treetops, and traffic slows on Middleburg's main drag.

Surefooted in the box, I stroke a fastball that the infielders barely have time to watch disappear in the wildflowers in the meadow. Call me delusional, but I'm looking forward to something, *anything* from my bunch – "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" on the kazoo? – but this time there isn't even acknowledgment from Willie, who is over by the barn with a pocket calculator tallying the magic number to clinch the division. The count of those greeting me at home is none. I fume. I've grown not to expect Bryant Gumble or the red carpet. I understand how frustrating it is for others to communicate with me, since "going deaf later in life" I'd grown up with ears, and the others have suffered lifetimes of broken communications and now this is their time to unwind and coast along with fellow-folk. I get all that about how I'm too much trouble because I'm not what the community calls "deaf-same." But I also hear every opponent's cruelty – geak, freak, goon, invalid, abortion – take the putdowns personally and swing away not just for myself but for all of them, including Dummy Hoy, the famous deaf major leaguer, whose stats I've memorized and in only half a season have out-slugged.

There are records I wouldn't dream of touching.

The ancient Hill star, Joe Hanks, played in a time when they threw at your head or slid spikes high just because you were different. More than anyone I can empathize with how the game could stop being fun and become a cause. In the locker room one day, I spied a sign discussion between a few Oaks that were comparing my marks to the Hill great's. I checked the books and was so humbled by what Joltin' Joe had accomplished in a much shorter season than ours that in blowouts I let my bat and legs rest, and also hoped this act of denial might someday give me the balls off the field (with Willie in particular) that the apocryphal tales claimed Joe had shown on it.

Can a Bucks try any harder that?

I find other ways to conform. On the way to and from class, I no longer hold doors open even if I hear footsteps behind me. In the field, on pop-ups I stop whiplashing my head around and cultivate the kind of sixth sense of distance, space, and speed that the Hillies use to converge without bloodshed. I now signal to the pitcher and catcher instead of yelling "going!" if runners steal. None of that, none of the homeruns, none of the unstinting infield play – nothing in my three weeks at Hill (other than secret handshakes from Booeey and Jenna) help me be anything except outside the tribe. I'm damn proud of my streak at the plate. But the hit parade can't last forever. A little thump on the back now and then might stretch it another day. Worse, Willie seems to be getting a big kick out of the shabby treatment the slugger is receiving. I wonder if the more I play like Thunder, the more Willie sees me that way, and the farther the cloud of vengefulness spreads from the coach's afro.

Things are getting much too complicated.

As I touch home plate, I say, "Fuckin' Willie," and make up my mind that the martyr act has gone on long enough. I vow to beat all their worthless asses, beginning with the monkeyshouldered Cro-magnon brothers. But wait: they're flagging me down. I hold out for a second offer and cautiously sit between them. They throw their arms around my neck. As I gulp, "It's about time," the fruits of victory singe my sinuses. I nose-dive.

Luke turns to his brother, *Two questions: what do you think eats ants?*

Jerry shrugs, *An anteater?*

You ever seen one?

No. Number two?

Is Coach Yoda lezzie or what?

You would hope so because what guy would go for that?

Lounging in foul territory, spitting distance from Coach Yoda and the others, I cough, "Now I got deaf benchwarmers farting in my fucking face, so I got that going for me, too."

Tischler elbows Al. *You ever wonder why we never heard of this guy?*

We can't hear?

Baseball's his main thing, and he doesn't know the 'beanball' sign?

Al encourages Tisch, *Kind of strange, right? Like you said, 'The deaf Babe Ruth just fell out of the sky.'*

My mom was military. We moved a lot. I didn't graduate from the Texas school, but I was there for two years. Ninth and tenth grades.

Does Willie know that?

Anybody else on this team go to the school in Texas?

Let me finish. You interrupt too much. Nobody else did...including this LaMar, I'm pretty sure. He would have been my year. I wrote a girlfriend who graduated from there, in case LaMar came after I left.

Maybe LaMar was 'upstate.'

Considering all the lambastings the Oaks had been handing out, Al is looking at me as if wondering if I'm needed around anymore. He squints and I can see he's running through the gamut: tell Willie to cut LaMar loose now, but is that worth risking losing the amazing woods that keep suburbia, Canarsie, and all the other shit permanently out, and so he must guess that LaMar himself is in no big hurry to get back to the heirloom armpit he'd called home before Hill.

Al shrugs at Tischler, *Or maybe he had a sex change.*

At the plate, Booeey is moving around in the box, opening and closing his stance, trying just about anything to shake his slump. After fouling two off the barn's roof that had "clobber me" and "for a good time call" written all over them, he steps off the plate and looks exasperatedly at me.

I stand and dramatize a relaxed stance that features a tucked shoulder, crooked elbow, and a barehanded cut from the heels.

Booeey does a pretty good imitation, sending the ball screaming for the maples in right. Beating his chest, he hoofs the horn in full gait.

Tischler signs and shrugs to Al, *I think Booeey just had a sex change, too.*

I hope that Sarah or anyone else has seen the clout. The stands are clear, but for the assistant dean of students, Julie Ross, in an Outkast T-shirt, with a homemade placard in her lap. She lifts it.

Celebrate?

Her expressionless look is for me, not Booeey.

I sit Indian-style and ponder her message. Willie remains out-cold in the grass. The Oaks give Booeey his happy due at home with Jenna pulling up the rear. She throws her arms around his helmet and pulls back for a better look. And had the moose smiled any bigger his pimples would've likely blown full scale on her glasses.

Chapter 20

Generally things are tracking. I've survived three weeks. The Oaks with only 10 games to play are rising steadily with the temperature (or like a clown shot from a canon, depending on your perspective). I'm walloping everything in sight and alternately Hoovering anything hit my way. Each morning has a new and different feel. I enjoy popping out of bed, bathing, being the first to breakfast then to class – and for the time being have all but forgotten the reason I'm here at all: to finish business with Willie.

However, on the commuter rail to town I feel a chill flush from my liver to his lips. Though I've gotten good at inventing passable gestures, I want to sign as little as possible, and I don't feel like talking anymore than I have to.

Eventually the grilling begins, and our sign conversation with the blanks filled in goes sort of like this:

Where'd you go after high school, Bucky?

I rode across a lot of open range. I got to the Golden Gate Bridge and stopped. It was like driving into a postcard.

Wow.

Every time. Thought I was going to bust through cardboard.

Cool. What did you do there?

I made pizza.

Why?

I was broke. They were hungry. You?

Never been to California. As far as work: only Hill.

How come?

Coming out of school, it was a fantastic opportunity. I like administration. I get a charge out of feeling valued. How come a school for the hard of hearing? It was an adjustment. Then one day it felt like home. The deaf are achievers. Even if the students make it tough for me. You guys push me. You don't waste words. I'm a sucker for the eye contact. It's so honest.

I outstare her for several seconds then press my face to the window where the Philadelphia skyline sticks up like black icicles. Maybe everybody is faking it. Even Julie. Those boobs sure look too good to be true. Worse, maybe she's seen enough in my eyes to know I'm not the real deal, and over there behind that dismissive smile, she's just playing along while she figures out how to dispose of me. I'm convinced this ride is fated to end where I got on, between Cheese Stake's neon sign and the Tastykake billboard. Then, quite unexpectedly, Julie grabs my sticky palm. Our stop has come up.

Seems we're not going into the heart of Philadelphia after all, if the city actually still has one. Julie leads the way to Ursiola's Ristorante, a friendly place famous for its tomato pies and kitty-corner to Thunder's kingdom, gate 12 of Veteran's Stadium. Sweat beads in my hairline and muttonchops in anticipation of the boisterous atmosphere, the jovial bartender, and the autographs of local celebrities covering the room's veneer. Mrs. Ursiola, the round, voluble widow with bi-focals, chin stubble, and cheeks that match the checked tablecloths, who used to moon over my family and play the surrogate grandmother to me and Nikki, is on us before I can duck. She hands us menus and smiles blankly at a table in back.

Without my father beside me, I'm just another guy with a wallet to Mrs. Ursiola. Anonymity has its benefits, I just wish I didn't have to borrow that wallet's only green from Al, who seemed weirdly eager to help for my side of dinner.

Julie leans across the table with a playful look. "I smell something strange." She tugs gently at the collar of my sweater and a string comes loose. Still smiling playfully, she pulls the string until it unravels all the way to her nose. She inhales, sighs, and signs, "Yeah. Magnolia blossoms. Do you know that I love – *love* magnolias?"

I turtle down into the sweater's lingering aroma, blasted by another wave of reprieve. "I could've broken my neck in that tree," I brag sheepishly.

Major brownie points.

At ease again, I consult the menu and remember a meal at this very table with his Mom and Nikki, when Dad had an away game. I couldn't have been more than twelve.

"Mom, what's pseudo-money?"

"Tens and twenties."

“What’s God?”

“An idea some people have.”

“How about motherfucker?”

Mom hesitates but little Nikki chimes in, “Someone who fucks peoples’ mothers. Don’t you know anything?”

“Nikki, you shouldn’t know so much. And Kenesaw, what did we say about keeping the sleeves out of the spaghetti?”

“That it’s an idea some people have.”

After I give Julie the thumbs down on olives and anchovies, she orders us a large pepperoni from the waiter. There follows a long silence from which I excuse myself to wash my hands. I stay in the john until I get scared Julie might get the impression I’m taking a stupendous plop. I hurry back.

You okay? she signs.

I give her the high sign.

The waiter makes room for the pizza. The rearrangement of chianit bottle/candle and fake flower reveal a low-hanging black and white: an autographed action photograph of Thunder Bucks. No dive in town is safe from him.

“What’s up?” she signs and says.

I laugh scornfully and cover up by signing, *Enjoy...pizza...enjoy...company?*

She nods. *Your signing has gotten better. And your manners!*

Could...no...worse. I make a goofy look that gets a rise out of her.

That’s gross. That’s sick-looking. Do it again!

I do only it isn’t the right face.

Not that one.

I try again.

“Eww! That’s it!” she laughs. “You’re good. And the baseball team! Look what you’ve done!”

Big...in...Middleburg. Third...in...all.

There are more than three teams.

Seven, I sign. Does she not know about Willie’s deal with President Miller?

See...large...man...smash...today...ball? If...gets...religion...

Incredible. What do the Oaks have to do to win the league?

Ten...games...win...much.

Tough job.

Then...championship...still. Talk?

“Sure.”

Though this parallel universe does not lend itself to the basic celebrity perks of dugout interviews, photo ops, or Chris Berman sobriquets ala Bucky LaMar-plot and Bucky LaMar-quis de Sade, it is great to be a star again and to sermonize as such. Pizza crust nicks the roof of my mouth, reminding me to keep it labored and flat. “Baseball’s a funny game. You can bust it every time and never get a hit. You can fan with the bases loaded and score three runs.”

“Is that why you like it?”

“That’s why we’re doomed. We’re not long on luck.”

“Luck never won a championship,” she says and signs dramatically.

“Try telling them that.”

Them? Tell them?

If Julie still thinks I'm one of them, why don't they? *Us*, I sign and mope.

Ever pour that anger into a homerun?

All.

Dad's picture floats past. Would he be proud?

Sounds like a healthy way of expressing it.

Her logic makes sense to me and I feel all right. Best of all, I can finish a sentence and a thought with Julie Ross, an impossible feat with Justine. The obvious problem is that I can't bare my naked soul to Julie without disaster smiting me. Not that I'm bucking for any kind of soulbaring.

It's a warm, windy night. Each time patrons enter or leave, a gust laps the room, and the candle flame's shadow stretches and recoils across the half-cleared pizza pan. A song I haven't heard in years plays on the jukebox. In the past, I've hidden a weak spot for Lionel Ritchie, but now as Julie hums some of the lyrics, I'm about to lay off the foghorn and lean toward the microphone.

How does this compare to the pizza you made? Julie signs

I put a slice away in one bite, forcing Lionel Ritchie back down my throat. Her whole face grins, and things are under control again. A new song plays, and the squirming continues.

A crowd came in and sat down,

And a man began to yell...

About savin' souls to heaven,

And for the sinner there was hell.

Well, later on that night...

In a motel room down the road...

He kept his meeting for a cat-o-nine beating

From a leather-clad man named Moe.

An honest man...we're lookin' for the last honest man...

Never has a song driven up to the edge of the fiery cliffs. I'd get up and yank the jukebox cord out of the wall if I weren't supposed to regard such devices as if they were extra-terrestrials. Luckily, my anthem segues into a caterwaul that would shame a deaf scuba diving team. Saved by The Good Ship Alanis. Julie looks as if she's bitten into a slice of penicillin.

She says, "With all the airplanes that go down every day, why can't Morissette be on one?"

My heart slugs my chest. This is truly music to his ears. I want to learn to sign better. I imagine – once the Oaks have run the board and I've proven to be a worthy guardian of my father's necklace and pendant – Professor Goodnight in another college's lab shouting *Eureka!* and announcing to the sparsely-attended press conference that he's found a way to reverse hearing loss by meningitis. Then I can take Julie to a show, blow her doors off at the radio game, and have a shot at those fabulous knockers.

I can't help reaching anyway – for a book jacket I'd seen in her office. "I like Maeve Brennan."

"The short story writer?" she signs and says.

I nod.

"You know her?"

"Not personally, thank God. Mistress of hopeless relationships."

“They give *me* hope.”

“You have had it rough.” I borrow a pen from pen and scribble on a napkin some writers I think she’ll have a field day with.

“You *read*! She catches herself, appalled at how mean that must’ve sounded, though there is no mistaking the excitement in her voice. “More than I, probably.”

“When not clubbing baby seals.”

“Touche.” She bends forward and the lace of her bra shows. “Can I ask you something?”

Here’s one I’ve picked up from Al: *You...can...and...you...may.*

“If you had one night left on earth, what would you do?”

I feel myself grow a couple inches. “Do I know it’s my last night?”

“What does it matter?”

“It matters everything. If I don’t know I’m dead the next day, who cares?”

“You know it’s your last night. What would you do?”

Track.

“And run?”

Horse.

“Horse track?”

“To wager on the ponies.”

She seems distressed. “Oh. I’ve never gambled.”

“You’re missing out. It’s a rush.”

“What about the people you care about and love? You wouldn’t spend your last night with your mother and sister?”

“They could come.”

“Rousing,” she says, leaning back away from me. “You should write some of this stuff down. It’s morose.”

“I won’t forget.”

“Is there anything you believe in?”

“Depression.”

“Are you getting psychological help?”

“You mean in addition to these little sessions?”

“What about a fantasy? Do you have a fantasy?”

“Everybody’s got a fantasy.”

“What’s yours?”

“More hair.”

“I like bald men.”

If she’s saying I’m bald, I don’t want to know. But if bald is what she wants, we’re through before we’ve even started. I’d spend my last dime on snake oil before going bald. I’d give up gambling to fund the regeneration of my scalp. That’s not much of an engagement ring, I’m noticing. But what could I get her? A Garcia and Vega pinkie model, *if* I could bum the two dollars and fifty cents from Al. *I am such a dummy*, I look toward the kitchen and realize. The reason Al didn’t hesitate to fund this outing was to create another chance for LaMar to blow the scam on his own.

I stuff the pizza in two-fisted to stop the mouth, but there’s no denying that the assistant dean and I are often on the same page, even though our words can be far from synchronous. I ogle the last slice, then remember the pizza is half hers.

“You’d have to roll me out of here,” she says. “I’ll take the crust.”

I point at Tiramisu on the menu and sign, *Divide?*

“If you don’t inhale it first.”

Instinctively, my eyes lower to my stomach. I’ve really let it get out of control. “Believe it or not. I’m kind of on a diet.”

“Oh no. I didn’t mean...”

Okay.

“No it’s not. The truth is: you’re a very attractive man. And some kind of athlete. The girls must follow you around.”

Not...now.

“So can we try again?” she asks me. This time her aim is not a gimmicky conversation starter. “Your last night on earth?”

“If it was horse racing season, I would be at the track, betting on a horse, surrounded by all the people that I love and cherish in the world.”

“And if it wasn’t racing season?”

“Then there’d be some serious fuckin’ heroin going on.”

Crust flies out of her mouth, ahead of a punishing bray. “Could I come?”

“You handle Twinkie and Devil Dog detail.”

“Deal!”

We shake on it. She’s stopped being the white-hat administrator and is just a girl trying to have a good time on a night off. I go for morel “You’d spend your last night with Toadie.”

“I don’t remember selective consonant displacement in your file,” she stifles a giggle. “If he wasn’t on some important project.”

I fake a yawn. “Tell me how chasing some stupid-ass-bird is more important than hanging out with Hill College’s Assistant Dean of Students.”

The way her face lights up, I half-expect her to walk. In a way, she has. She looks parched for her fiancé but not in a confident way, not like she knows he could slake her desire. I think of the time Justine and I shared a sleeping bag in her parents’ basement, telling knock-knock jokes in Latin until the eucalyptus-scented candle burned out.

Julie holds her ring to the flame and appraises it from various angles. “I’ve told Toby my mother’s divorced. Not how many times.”

“Marry him immediately.”

She’s offended, but all the staring in the world isn’t going to back me off my opinion. Her gaze changes, becomes more focused as if she’s panning my eyes for something deeper, like an earring or something even more dear that is falling irrevocably into the murk of a dirty lake. She gives up her search and sighs, “Harold Bucky Lamar, how do we trade some of those RBI’s for a few social skills?” Her cell phone rings. “Speak of the Toby. Excuse me.”

I’m expecting to be disgusted by love-birdy yak-yak, but Julie’s salesy demeanor dies gets shot down instantly. It seems Toby is staying in the hills until July now. She cuts the call short after extracting Toby’s commitment to revisit the conversation soon. Two bites later, she signs and says, “We used to talk every night for three hours. Now it’s more like three minutes every few days.”

“Lotta fish in the sea.”

“Not many catches.”

“Not if your line’s not in the water.”

“Do you have someone special or anything?”

“Nobody special. Or...anything.”

“Sorry.”

“Sorry, hell.”

Julie signs and says, “If you think marriage is some personal goal of mine, you’re wrong. Unlike some women I know, I don’t feel incomplete without it. I love Toby. We have scads in common.”

Awesome.

“It *is* awesome. What do you mean by that, ‘awesome?’”

This is a lot more talking than I’m used to for starters, and the Texas deaftone is wearing me out. “To me, ‘love’ and ‘things in common’ are bookends. My parents loved each other. They had *children* and *debt* in common. What about all the in-between?”

“You lost me ‘in-between.’”

“The cream filling. The flavor.”

“Oh, you must mean the bitterness.”

“The ponies, actually. The heroin. The Twinkies and Devil Dogs.” I say and sign poorly, “Julie, don’t you think it’s weird to have it all worked out, up to your last night on earth? What if, for instance, real life gets in the way?”

“Maybe I like weird,” she signs and speaks.

“No offense, but you don’t know squat about weird.”

“I’m here with you. No offense, by the way.”

“None taken,” I say.

“Good. Now let me tell you something about normal...normal is planning for the upside. Some days I want a houseful of kids. Some days I don’t want any. I’m 24. The only thing I know for sure – in case you’re wondering – is that I want to spend *my* last night on earth shopping with Mom. And when I’m gone—”

“—I figured you got that mapped out, too—” I mumble.

“—they can cremate me and scatter my ashes in the middle of Madison Avenue.”

“Sometimes I think about becoming a monk.” Looking at Dad’s picture, I realize something about the way he’s driving through a defender across the goal line: that isn’t a look of jubilation. It’s a special kind of humiliation that only a smile can cover.

I excuse myself to write another letter.

Dear Dad...

...is as far as I get before the urinal blurs to a headstone and I’m watching the sacrament from the trees, the mist silver as the morning sky is gold. A light wind brushes the grass and scatters dogwood petals across burial plots. Mourners insulate my mother and sister from the paparazzi who are led by a slovenly hack, self-nicknamed Sweet Lou, who is rooting high and low for me and the only other noteworthy no-show: Willie Chance.



You’re a pro at concealing anguish. If there is anything you can do as well as your father, it is that. With two big ones on Pee Wee Cox and a swing-and-a-miss from Princeton baseball history, you give the fans one of your father’s patented lips-only never-quit smiles. It’s

really a wince, but Thunder is the only one in the park who would possibly know that, or that his son's arm is about to fall off. And if Thunder were still in this picture, he might return your lips-only never-quit smile with one of his own that would say "been there, done that." Then he'd blow from his deteriorated cigar as if to say "and look where it's gotten me," thus freeing you from foolish thoughts about the consequences of staying in the game too long and whether you should take yourself out before it's too late. If Thunder were there to lend that kind of support, you can think about anything, or nothing at all, or the way Justine's skirt is flapping against her thighs, tanned and sour with light perspiration.

Now seems the perfect time to avow yourself a one-woman man (though it's not clear to anyone you have much choice in the matter.) On occasions you fill with a gale around Justine, addressing her as if she were some rapper's bling with priceless gems such as "Zup, foo'?" and "Snoop-bee-doop." Sometimes she laughs; sometimes she thinks you're an imbecile - never can tell with Justine. She's so goddamned good-looking and aloof, you feel like you have to keep proving yourself to her - like she's been put on this planet for one reason: to drive you nuts.

Last night was the epitome. Lying next to her in the dorm (your roommate finished exams early and left), the wind snapping branches, moon and shadow darting in and out of the room, you inhaled her until your head rang and a node of semen leaked out. Justine, of course, had only arrived in body, not in spirit, still yakking about every mile of her trip from Durham to Trenton. During her filibuster, she let you roam her curves, over the baby-fat belly-pooch to the elastic of her cotton panties.

While you scrape the dirt from your spikes in the grass behind the mound, you have a premonition that this is what a wife is like.

Since the night still has some fine legs that seem to enjoy my company, I fill my palm with tap water and gargle the tomato seeds out of my teeth. Back at the table, there's a tiramisu cake with twenty-two candles roaring.

"Happy twenty-second!" Julie claps.

She hasn't forgotten Harold LaMar's birthday. Thick and wide, the cake could feed a large family.

"Wow. We could use a little help."

She signs and winces, "I was expecting a few hungry ballplayers. Guess they're studying."

For once I'm happy to be shunned by the Oaks. Then I think about Harold, wherever he is. Forty-five-and-whenever doesn't have the most blissful ring. It sounds too much like twenty-two-and-incognito. I wonder if Harold is alone, if he still has his hair, and if he'll mind terribly my eating his cake.

Julie smiles sweetly.

Thank you, I sign and shut my mouth on a riot of emotion that shoots out my nostrils and blows down the candles. Julie doesn't seem to mind and asks what I've wished for. I want to tear down my father's picture and hold it next to my face so Julie can see that underneath it all

I'm indeed a Bucks. Instead, I lower my eyes to hide my look of whorish longing – not from her but from the kiss of death that has to be on the premises or en route. To have a friend like Julie would not be a wish so much as a dream.

"Now you *have to* tell me," she says and signs, after lifting my chin.

"My wish is that you won't think I'm..." The last word catches in my throat, so I try signing. What comes through my fingers seems to take Julie by surprise: *week*.

I dig into the tiramisu, sawing off hefty slices for each of us. By now, she must've noticed I'm a little stout for ballet. If I could read her thoughts, I'd bet they'd say that her new scholarship student is a strange brew. In her psychoanalytic way she's been parsing the similarities in me to each of her mom's ex-husbands: bronzy curls and big sideburns, working-man forearms, diamond blue eyes in a sullen boyish face, neanderthal jut of jaw, this relaxed way of sitting as if my midriff is a pillow for her head, and that scar on the cheek that looks like a line drawing she's seen of an anus. Then her heart seems to drop to about ten degrees possibly for the only man she never really knew – her birth father.

She shovels in a mouthful of tiramisu and scans the wall of pictures for one of Toby, though she knows she'll never find him in this dive bar's collection of semi-celebrities, or seen in tights, or heard saying he's going out for a toothpick, with no thought of ever returning. She mumbles as she chews and swallows, "Who's the grown woman in this scenario, Mother? Who – in her very shrewd selection of the Steadiest of Eddies – is scaling the peaks of female maturity, arm in arm with her *life* partner? Who – at 24 – is almost over that hill?"

But halfway to a belly ache, she looks across hopefully at me or whatever it is she thinks I am. And my birthday wish for Harold LaMar is that Julie is deciding his stand-in is too courageous to be weak, and his blue eyes too bottomless for a passing fancy.

Chapter 21

By the time the Oldsmobile wheezes into the field's lot, the Hill College News is confetti on the passenger seat. Leaving the car door open, Professor Robert Goodnight sneaks behind the Oak bench to where President Miller is standing. He waves a hand in front of her face. Her look says she's not a fan of his approach.

"I'm glad the team is going out on a high note!" His whine is panicky. His resplendent locks are dull under the gray sun. His breath could clear a locker room. She shoos it.

"I wouldn't count them out, yet."

Julie is in the stands holding a cardboard exclamation point, next to several teachers, who each hold a square-cut piece of white cardboard, together spelling:

BUCKY!

Goodnight reads the sign over and over.

"What is a *Bucky*?" Goodnight bawls at Willie, who has to tense his hips from shaking them.

In the past few weeks, as the Oaks scaled the rickety basement stairs and ran away from the league's weaker sisters and into second place, Willie had been tempted to turn me loose on the hill and see how many smoking fastballs it would take for the scouts to scurry from the woodwork. He told me he'd gotten Coach Rudden's number at Princeton for a firsthand accounting of that kind of transaction and I told him don't do it, it'll screw everything up. But he kept on and on, and one day while he was gazing rapturously, nay amorously, out at shortstop, I had to yell, "Jesus, Dude, is this what's known as a Graterford shower-hour flashback?"

Willie hit the water cooler for a cup, quelling his addiction. And thus we established an unspoken treaty that the past was off-limits – both his and mine – at least, for now.

But on this Pennsylvania spring day, as Goodnight implodes, Willie calmly unravels a kink in his beard and responds, "*What is a Bucky?*"

The visiting team's batter lashes a grounder up the middle that parts the grass between the mound and second. I range behind the bag, snare, somersault (since the belly will now allow), and gun the runner at first.

President Miller is stoic. Goodnight whistles involuntarily. The silo beams. The opposing players cower. The Oaks leave the field like gentlemen. Willie examines the beard follicle on his fingertip with the blowhard look the jesters on Sports Center love to conjure who, in their zeal to eradicate the soul of the game, report the trade of a \$10 million scrub for three \$4 million scrubs as if the whole bunch could get you a medium Slurpee. "That right there," says Willie, flicking the follicle to the wind and licking his lips like the prince of bombast, Al Michaels, "is a Bucky."

Julie and the teachers raise their ***Bucky!*** sign.

"Holy Mother of Mercy," I mumble as I jog to my end of the bench. I shake my head scoldingly at Julie, hoping she'll put the kibosh on it before Tisch makes his way in from center.

Al snickers, "Want me to take her off your hands for the night?"

"Yeah, Al. We'll swap. Sarah deserves a little stardom in her life."

Who can't in this joint?

Al glances over his shoulder at Julie as if he's contemplating my offer. She timidly lowers her exclamation point. I mouth, "My bad," sweep Al aside, and doff my cap. As I bow to the stands, the #12 pendant falls out of the opening in my jersey.

Goodnight pursues Willie to the other end of the bench, from the fans' side of the chest-high fence. "Coach, I've seen a few plays like that in my lifetime. Not a single one by a deaf teenager. Who, praytell, is this particular Bucky?"

"LaMar. Harold LaMar."

"Never heard of him. Does he go to this school?"

"Oak to the bone. Remember, your Nobel Prize winner?" Willie nods at the field, anxious to get back to the game.

"Ah, yes," the professor recalls, dazzled by the light off the jewelry I frantically stuff back in my shirt.

"Funny thing," Goodnight notes to Willie, "that pendant is #12, and this Bucky LaMar's pink uniform number is 13. In fact, that pendant is the only #12 on the field."

Willie clears his throat. "Do you mind, Professor? I got a game to catch – uh, coach."

"So you do," the professor says, strangely sedate. "And *bonne chance*, Chance. *Bonne chance.*"

Willie's grandma was from the islands so he knows voodoo when he hears it. He takes the scenic route to the coaching box, muttering at me, "I knew that thing couldn't bring no good." He stops at the scoreboard to rap a flurry of paint chips off the old boards.

Almost overnight, the cellbock witnessed Willie's lifelong mantra plummet from, "I ain't never gettin' married" to "Don't leave me, baby. I'll do whatever you want."

"Leave someone with your potential? Man, they never even heard of your ass, and then you were three times All-Pro!" There, at Graterford, after ten semi-faithful years of dating, in the third week of his incarceration, after a ten-minute ceremony and a twenty-minute honeymoon, Willie pulled up his orange baggies and became just another dude with family on the outside – until football season rolled around. Then he was Papito. Not because he knew how the game was played, but because he knew how the game got played. Crips pumped iron with him, Bloods broke bread with him, The Aryan Nation turned down his bed, and guards listened rapt to the former All-Pro's insights. How can you tell which teams are hurting? How do you know which ones care from week to week? The warden got wind of Willie and invited him around for coffee and snacks, until several significant wads were blown on the Seattle Seahawks. Soon word spread that the former Eagles receiver could pick only losers. Willie got solitary, allegedly for his own safety. It was probably true.

Then someone with real potential got an idea.

It might've been Nunu who got Willie sprung from the box to the yard, where a soup-line of convicts and prison employees waited anxiously for his prognostications so they could bet the opposite way. He was a sensation.

And like his first celebrated career in sports, Willie was so shamefully incredible, he couldn't resist going against himself one Sunday, too, and so went his Super Bowl ring.

Chapter 22

The Oaks had caught the bug, and with it came a prideful work ethic. On any given night, players could be seen running bases or playing pepper in the lamplight of the walk in front of the administration building. GPAs didn't suffer, yet nobody brought homework to games. Games were sacred rites. Now that the Oaks had the luxury of believing in karma, after a unanimous vote, Tischler declared that the team's success was dependent on full-time Oak

concentration during games. Peeking at a book other than the scorecard meant nine innings with the jockstrap Al hadn't washed since the day Bucky ran practice, stuffed in your piehole. You might also suffer the *silent* silent treatment, which meant no participation in mid-inning philosophical debates that were as common and spirited as they'd always been and often tackled such highfalutin subjects as whether Mizuno spikes were worth a yen, who made a better glove, Rawlings or Wilson, or if supplements, juiced-up baseballs, and postage-stamp strike zones were out of the mix, would you swap Steve Carlton and Mike Schmidt for Curt Schilling and Scotty Rolen?

But winning just increased Tischler's dissatisfaction with not knowing a) who was the cherubic fencebuster and b) from whence came the Herculean swing that had so smitten the fleet center fielder's idol, Willie Chance. Between classes he went to the bar off the strip and quizzed the waiter about the pitcher of beer. He pressed the waiter on how one player might've caught on to the beer's being piss-diluted; the man gave up nothing. Sensing Willie's improved mood, the Oak captain swallowed his ego, went the coach's office, and signed, *That was a great move, getting LaMar, Willie. Are you sure his record is on the up-and-up?*

You mean the winning record?

The winning's good. It's great! Just -- I didn't know this at first -- but I do know almost for certain he did not attend the school in Texas.

"Checkin' up on me, boy? You ain't trust in me?"

Not that. He could be anyone. I just don't want you to get hurt again.

"And I don't want you to be nobody anymore."

Willie, there was a time I was nobody. All I wanted was for you to think I was a star.

Got to do things to be a star.

Willie, I love the game of baseball. But I'm realistic. It is not my ticket out of the ghetto. I have plans.

So?

I don't want yours messing mine up.

"How in the white man's world could anything I plan fuck things up worse for you?"

Professor Goodnight says if I do a post-grad year as his lab assistant, with the right recommendation I could go to almost any med school in the country.

Because you're deaf?

Because I've got a 4.0 in chemistry, and I'm at the top of my class. I only thought about being a veterinarian, but now I might do something with people.

"How come you never told me this?"

"This is the longest conversation we've had in two years."

Lately I've noticed the moose and several others want to let bygones be bygones whenever I hit the ball out into monkeyland. During a homerun trot, I discern the cause of their hesitation: Tisch stands guard at the bat rack, biting down on a red licorice stalk. Not even Al has the guts to stir under his I-will-kill-your-ass stare. Running events back in my mind, I realize that against righties (most of the pitchers we've faced), Tisch bats behind me, and so is in perfect position to ward off any gesture of Oak fellowship. It cheers me to know I'm not the only one with hang-ups. But if the kid's looking for an apology for the accidental nose job or the pinching of his position, he'll have to wait until his teeth rot and fall out (I'm the victim!). I doubt seriously that's what it's about anyway. As for the Lakers, the Fakers, the Takers, the Movers, the Shakers, and the Quaker Oats, they are too consumed with hanging their heads between their

knees, hiding their faces from the world, and pondering potential new lives and identities of their own to wonder why Hill's snubbed superstar couldn't even get a, "How-do?" from his own alleged teammates.

By creaming our division's first-place team, the Commodores (a holy host of prima donnas who cry about every call) in both ends of a double-header, 5-1 and 14-8, the Oaks run the streak to 14 games. For the first time in school history the Oaks sit alone in first place of the Eastern Division. Seventeen fans witnessed the historic event. From the top of the batting order to the bottom, the Hill disposition can be described as cautiously optimistic. Since letdowns are the rule, not the exception, celebrations will wait until the Championship Cup is under lock and key – with little in the way of company – in the trophy case.

Nonetheless, Coach Willie Chance says he stays up every night at the kitchen table, sending postcards to Hill baseball alums.

(One day Willie had paused at the equipment room wall, plastered with framed team photos. He scoured the faces from Joe Hanks' squad to the early '90s, which was when the wall ran out of space. They all deserved a place up there, and Willie wondered which bunch would have to step aside for this year's picture. Swallowing a lump, he said in a hoarse voice, "This one's for all of us." Then he had an idea that cost him two chili dogs all the way and got him the personal contact information for all living former players.

Willie's weekly newsletters to the ex-players reported on the team's success and urged the retired brothers to attend games and show "\$upport." None did, but how could Willie know that Joe Hanks' administrative assistant was forwarding the "Greetings from Middleburg" to Singapore, where Joe was working due diligence on a merger candidate? Or that Joe was still bitter that deafness had kept him from a career on the diamond, especially since the impairment had not been a barrier to financial success. Or that on the other side of the world, Willie's postcards could make the 6'3" record-holding tri-athlete punch a wall. Because none of that interfered with the Oaks' continued domination. We soared to 15-9, the highest winning percentage for any Hill College baseball team.)

Everyone is contributing. The perennial benchwarmers, the twins Covalowski, chase foul balls under cars that now fill the parking lot. They tend the equipment in organized rows. Relief pitchers keep the book. Jenna steals vital information from enemy lips. The night before home games, Booley tries to woo one more fan, dropping Sarah a note through the college mail. Though she comes to not a single game, the moose keeps his shoulder tucked and drives his batting average over .300 for the first time since Pony League. Al's earned run average and personal run production are interchangeable – that is to say that on the days he gives up four runs, he'll knock four in, and on days he's unhittable, he too is inexplicably hitless at the plate. If he could slap a pig in the ass with a shovel, Tischler would be a lock for all-league honors in center field, where he covers the grass like a tarp. Taking out his hostility toward Chance and Bucks on the left and right fielders by running through them for any fly ball, he now has free reign from foul line to foul line. Tisch's defensive play serves the squad well in another regard. The Oaks now hide two good batsmen in the outfield. Sammy Doyle, a freshman, is not the swiftest afoot in right, but he has a powerful stroke. Lefty Lopez, who got the moniker not from being a lefty but from the eye on that side of his head, which curves so close to his nose you can scarcely see color in it, is a specialist at drawing walks. So Willie cottons to Jenna's idea of putting Lefty in left, since he is much better moving to his right than the other way, and having Doyle hug the line in right with Tisch copping grazing rights to everything in the middle. Snooter McDougal does a more than serviceable job on the right side of the infield. Yours truly

gobbles up something over than carbohydrates for once, getting anything in the dirt I can lay leather on. Some days I'm a hitting machine, the bat a joystick in my fingers; others, I lose the touch and can't hit for dick. On those days Willie does shake his hips each time somebody new knocks in the game-winner. The coach even contrives use for the Covalowskis, whom he's taken to calling "MoFrick" and "MoFrack." He uses Luke as a batting practice pitcher, thereby saving the real hurlers' arms for games, and makes Jerry the bullpen catcher. Luke puts his heart into the job and gets so good at feeding pumpkins to the Oaks that the team batting average jumps 20 points. Late in a game the Oaks were 10 over the Vocats, a win that would put them a game and a half out of first in the division with only five games to play, Jerry took the catcher's mitt down the line so his brother could loosen up for some real action. Willie got off his comfortable duff, went over to watch Luke's form, and told him though it wasn't going to happen today, he'd get his shot.

The Oaks have developed a get-in-the-mud kind of grubby reverence for the game. Baseball diamonds, ours or anyone else's, become our sties and we slopped around to our hearts' content and bang-up results. Even Al takes a boy scout's pride in the grassy scrapes on his elbows and the scab on his knee his fevered play keeps re-opening. Except for the firstbaseman, Zernial, who has been constipated for a month and strained a muscle in his back passing a brick, the team is staying injury-free.

Inevitably, however, after back-to-back extra inning wins that require more than a little bit of luck and a bad call that benefits the Oaks for once, a chill blows through the locker room, and there is no hot water in the showers. The seniors take swift action. They decree that the words 'Alice' and 'Deal' are forbidden. Cookie Hartung gladly takes a C- in his Satire class for describing Alice – in an otherwise brilliant paper on Through the Looking Glass – as "the bitch." Anyone who uses 'deal' in even the most innocuous of ways – what's the deal, deal me in, etc. – is dealt ten laps around the field by Jenna for every infraction. And in the sad case of Sonny Scheinblum, the powers that be only allow him to continue his 2-year romance with his high school sweetie, A----, if he addresses her as Margie and doesn't tell her why. She dumps him, sensing infidelity. She couldn't have been more right. Baseball trumps all. Her Dear Sonny letter is proudly tacked to the locker room bulletin board, and it fuels a tremendous thumping, 18-5 over the Folsom Fleas that puts us at the top of the pile.

How long could the romp continue?

Willie didn't want to know; and with the big sweep of the Commodores and the Flea-swatting behind us, he felt the air pool in his lungs as if he were riding the calm that follows a hard sneeze. Because that's what this was: a funhouse romp, a rollercoaster on the dip, and whether or not anyone would test fate and say so, we were all having the time of our lives. If the we could finish the ride without looking down, it was possible the Oaks could rampage through the last three games of the schedule and peak in the title match versus the harbingers of unemployment, ignominy, and one obnoxious big-eared prick's gloating gingivitis. Still with the Alice Deal Crusaders's ace, Bobby Blanks, up for all-American honors and most of Deal's line-up on the all-league ballot, Willie would get so racked with anxiety he'd shadow his new recruit from dinner to the dorm, stalking me tree to tree and looking up three stories to my window, waiting for the light to go out. And after it did, he'd patrol the back and side exits, often running laps around the building until he worked the rust out of his lungs.

He felt his powers returning – in better mental and physical shape than he'd been in years. He was over the moon; he just didn't want to show it. He'd seen this once before in his

own playing days. One pre-season, Las Vegas tabbed the Eagles at 40-1 to make the playoffs. They were underdogs every week of the season. But with every success, came a lift in confidence, and talents maximized. That ended up being the year he and Thunder won the Super Bowl. He saw the similarity between what he learned on the football field and what the little deaf school's baseballers were learning now. Winning teams, since they expected to win, could afford to be more strategic. The Oaks now had the luxury to be selective of pitches, and subsequently saw better ones to hit. Ultimately this got more men on base from walks, hits, and forced errors. The Oaks created situations, and used tactics like the hit-and-run, the double-steal, and the sacrifice fly. To Willie, there was little difference between the Super Bowl champs and the Oaks. Winning teams found ways to win games.

And now only three games remained on the schedule.

By Willie's math, the Oaks were a win from advancing to the championship against the Alice Deal Crusaders. Willie's inhaler hibernated. The change of seasons made him stronger. He decided that if the Oaks made the championship, he was going to buy himself a new pair of Docksidors. Of course he gave his afro more credit than it deserved for the team's turnabout. Despite Arminta's jabbering about how his cute silvery storm clouds had been upgraded to a vortex swallowing the rest of his head, if Willie didn't cut it off, she said she would, while he slept. When she finished, he said, "Are you ready to get laid, yet?" They did it all night, an option they didn't have on their honeymoon.

As for Goodnight, Willie felt safe that even the professor couldn't stick his nose where it didn't belong. College policy mandated that transcript inquiries go through the registrar. If ever there was a policy queen, President Miller was it. And as far as Willie could tell, if he told Joyce Van Wyck, the Hill registrar, to jump off the Ben Franklin Bridge, she'd say, "Should I wear red or yellow?" The morning Willie brought her the LaMar boy's cocked-up papers, she had bit her lip. "Normally I get these directly from the school. *After* the application is submitted."

"I know," he'd replied. "I was trying to save time and see if the kid would qualify. I been lookin' all around for players, Joyce."

When he spoke, Joyce heard only the warbling of an angel's harp. He counted on her faith, even if he felt like a shit doing so. "How does this record look?" he'd asked. "Can the kid even get in?"

She'd taken a look. "You know I'll have to talk to the school in Texas."

"He's a fine player, Joyce. The kind of fine player we don't get but once in forever. You call them; they call you; he falls off the face of the earth – we might as well forget him. Let him bag groceries the rest of his life." Then the tap of the watch, for effect. "Another nine innings this afternoon. We keep up this losing, Joyce...I'd really like to be back with you at Hill next year."

She wanted to believe Willie. But to keep the Texans out of the mix, it cost Willie two chili dogs all the way, a little peck on the lips, and a tug of her hair with a sexy sneer. Eventually, when the professor came calling, Joyce showed Goodnight the false papers, and she called Willie to let him know Goodnight had been by.

Willie put her at ease. "Joyce. The kid's as good as they come. I'll vouch for him. If something stupid comes up, which it won't, it's my neck, not yours. Goodnight's a spoilsport. Probably all stressed out about his tenure review next Fall. You've did your job. Put it out of your mind and that nasty-soft hair of yours."

She sighed romantically, and did.

A lifer in academia, Goodnight understood bureaucracy. He knew a runaround when he got one. He also stomached losing about as well as Willie Chance. More than anyone on campus might have suspected, Goodnight identified with the Oaks's dreary days and their fabulous upswing. In earlier days, after collecting summa cum laude honors from Harvard and a doctorate at Berkeley, he thought he was poised to plunge into a life of important research. Accolades, books, functions at the White House, institutes named after him. Slight problem, though. While Goodnight fecklessly mastered the most complex scientific theorems and laws, he had not one original idea. Zipski. Passed over for tenure for minority candidates, Goodnight became redundant when Berkeley downsized. Then he was dinged by the entire UC system and started anew at Idaho State, where he learned the tenure track was crooked and clear: fudge some deadwood's data for 10 years, or fudge your own. One night lying in bed in the thin mountain air, picking the lint out of his bellybutton, Goodnight realized the problem with middle-age was that you learned what you never wanted to: that no one had the answers, and to avoid self-abnegation, you too became the fierce guardian of that secret. Life was entirely random; things came and went; innocence was an illusion; naivete a delusion. The very next morning, he found the opening at Hill while surfing Monster.com. He decided then that humanity was what mattered most, and he pledged to go with the humans who wanted him. In return for their trust, he would give them everything he had.

So after coming up short with Joyce Van Wyck, the soon-to-be tenured professor connived to catch Harold LaMar off-guard. At the very least, he might put a bug in the kid's head that would knock him off his sensational game. Things like Harold LaMar, the professor was pretty damn sure, didn't just happen when you desperately needed them to, unless you fudged the data.

The accidental encounter would be easy to arrange since LaMar had pulled the highest grade of the section on the genetics midterm, a 59 out of 60. Goodnight brushed, flossed, and distantly followed Willie who distantly followed me to me dorm after dinner. As the dormitory door slammed shut and the coach began a light jog around the building, the professor went inside.

Readying for the door bulb and Jenna's nightly tutorial, I reflexively rise when I hear the knock on the door. Just as reflexively I sit back down on my bed. The bulb illuminates, and I wait a long moment, and open the door.

My pulse bounces. Goodnight alone is there.

I sign, *Hello*. Goodnight nods at me in a way that asks if he might come in. His lids are so droopy I think he might be asking if he can curl up and catch 40 winks. No such luck. His head rolls on his neck and he looks over the soft-core porn on the walls and signs, *Lovely*.

Me...too.

Confused, Goodnight signs, *I wanted to talk to you about your Genetics test.*

Awesome.

Excellent. Goodnight looks appeased. He sits on Al's bed batting his eyelids.

Then, *Let's cut the shit. What were you doing before you came to Hill, Mr. LaMar?*

I miss Al's pretty face – more than a lot of things, it turns out. More than I miss the radio game, more than I miss pitching, and by the time there's clapping up the hall, more than I miss the ruffle of Justine's tennis skirt. Goodnight's index fingers work both nostrils as I motion for him to repeat his question. My aim is for Al or Jenna to handle the query when he or she walks in.

But the clapping comes from neither one.

It's the executioner.

Before I can fabricate a delay, Tisch responds to the professor's question, *What was The Lard Our Savior up to before gracing us?* He splutters aloud, "Bagging groceries!"

"Really?" the professor says and signs. "Because Mr. LaMar is acing his classes. This is kind of a strange twist, Ron. You recruited Willie. He rode your coattails like crazy to get here. And then Willie pays you back by recruiting the guy who screws up the curve in biology."

Willie doesn't owe me anything.

"He is your uncle, right?"

What? I sign to both of them. I jump up and face Tischler. *Your...uncle?*

Tisch ignores me as usual.

"This keeps getting better," I mumble under my breath and sit down across from the dreary-eyed professor again.

There's a baseball sitting on a mound of Al's dirty shirts by the professor's foot. My Cheese Stake T-shirt has somehow made it to top of the pile. The professor picks up the ball and the shirt's logo is clear to everyone in the room. He spins the ball on his thumb. "The highest grade in the section," Goodnight says. He holds the baseball out from his body and stares at it as though trying to find a country on a world atlas. "Even higher than you, Ron. Now that surprised me."

I feel Tischler seethe and shake as I watch the little globe disappear in Goodnight's long fingers.

"Maybe you should hit the books harder, Ron," Goodnight says, dropping the ball on the pile of clothes. "Or find a way to get rid of this guy."

I respond quickly to the professor with a sign that Tischler once taught me, *Blow...my...black...knob.*

Goodnight's baffled eyes jack wide. *Your black...knob?*

Tischler fends off a chuckle and interprets. *He's a poet, too.*

"Of course he is. What isn't he? Deaf?" Goodnight laughs goofily. The yellow crumbs in his eyelashes go up and down. Tisch lights one of Al's cigs and pollutes the room enough for Goodnight's eyes to become red slits. Jenna shows up, but not before Goodnight makes a final bleary bid. "I'd really like to know more about you, Mr. LaMar. Who was your old coach? Can I get a teacher's name?"

In a daze I sign a word only he can see: *Thunder.*

I get the Cheese Stake T-shirt off the pile, and hand it in a ball to the Oak captain. *Thanks...for...let...me...borrow,* I sign.

Turning her back to Goodnight, Jenna rapidly adds to Tischler, *As his tutor, I can assure you, he will flunk the final.* She ushers all of us out, but not before the professor coughs, blinks bloodshot tears, signs, and says, "Please come by anytime, Mr. LaMar. We'll talk – Genetics." Then he signs to Tischler, *Ronald if I were in your shoes – deaf, a senior, trying to get into an Ivy League medical school – I'd forget about number 13. I'd only be thinking of number 1.*

However, neither he nor Goodnight could stop thinking about the Oaks's number 13. Tischler smelled the fresh scent of grease in the Cheese Stake shirt. He was up for the journey downtown, but there wasn't a day on the calendar when the Oaks didn't have a game or he didn't have chemistry lab or a study group for finals.

He tucked the shirt under his pillow and prayed for rain.

As for Goodnight, just because Joyce Van Wyck moved like a water buffalo was no reason for him to sit idly by while the school got gypped out of a science lab – if a person could, for example, discover that the registrar’s information did not jibe with the Texas high school’s. A misrepresented grade point average could mean Bucky LaMar was academically ineligible for scholarship funds. A criminal record cited by local authorities in Austin or Goodwell would mean a withdrawal of scholarship funds. Either way, Goodnight would have to wait for the information by mail, electronic or otherwise, since the Texan registrar, he’d ascertained, was deaf by meningitis herself. The championship game was still a week away, and a lot of winning had to take place between now and then. Goodnight preached patience to himself. If the team lost, he might look malicious. If they won, and any wrongdoing were uncovered by him, his defiance of school policy would be wholly defensible. His actions could only be seen as in the interests of the student body, the administration, and the Board. He might nab the lab and bag tenure in one fell swoop.

The air was full of new life and doomsday destruction. The instant Goodnight and Willie sniffed each other on the ball field, the two men had like visions. Goodnight saw a soundless tornado flatten his new science lab. Willie heard an invisible razor wire buzzing from foul line to foul line. Spring had definitely sprung Pandora’s box. Somehow I got Willie off his stoop and on one heck of a ride. There were dips and bumps, including my and the Julie’s budding friendship, but nothing Willie feels he can’t manage.

So Willie gives me a pair of tickets to a Phillies game and encourages me to take Julie and feel her out, not up, about anything boding ill up the hill. I assure him that her accepting my invitation can be read that all is not right. In truth, however, I’ll be surprised if Julie balks. She’s become a regular at the games, even the long trips. Following yesterday’s practice, she waited around with a bucket of KFC and we took an evening walk by the creek. We settled in the old stone amphitheater and stayed until the trees and hedges fuse into one dusky mass. I had prepared intensively with Jenna for this kind of get-together, practicing things I wanted to ask Julie about herself. How did she become a psychology nut? *From growing up in a nuthouse.* Did she ever have any close calls during a climb? *Part of getting your jollies was knowing that preparation and teamwork were always keeping peril just beyond reach.* Was there an alcoholic beverage that made her sick? *Too much gin and tonic the night of the high school prom now even made the smell of blooming mimosas sickening.* What did she want to be when she grew up, or was this it? *A Beach Boy.* What? *The rock group. I want to be one of the Beach Boys.* Had she grown up by the ocean? *Montclair, New Jersey.* *By nothing.* I jammed with revelations about commonalities in our lives though I was still in no shape to go any deeper with signs and if even I could I’d be constricted by the details. For example, I was dying to tell her that at Princeton, I showboated Montclair State, a team chock-a-block with pro prospects (aren’t they Division III?), or that my father had introduced me to the Beatles and the Beach Boys, and that in my not-so-humble view “Don’t Worry Baby” was the inspiration for the quintessential post-Beach Boys pop anthem, “Go All the Way” by the Raspberries, reinvented a year later by the Grass Roots (“Sooner or Later”), redone 60 ways to Sunday by The Cars, and that any number of bands from Third Eye Blind to Rick James to Foo Fighters built entire careers around rejiggering that tune. I held my peace.

She charged on with a host of subjects – the weather, all-time great short stories, the AIDS crisis in sub-Saharan Africa, what makes an exceptional hot dog, what a fraud Kevin

Costner is (it isn't *all* late-breaking news with this girl), and whether I had a plot for getting back to the West coast. I grumbled aggravatedly and she segued deftly into why her mother is on a record-setting marriage binge. For Julie, personal issues are things to think about aloud. I watched her lips and hands signing in the air in front of her boobs and felt like a surrogate for Toby in all ways but one. I wondered if Julie couldn't be like this with Toby, why should she go any farther with him? Between words and signs, I said chiefly this: "Your mother's choices don't have to be yours. Guys come and go, but she's the only mother you got." Whose words were these? Mine or hers? I was the one saying them. But I'd throttle anyone with the balls to make such a remark to me. For her part, Julie had a vacant look as though her mind had left the premises. I was in no hurry to haul it back. (Ever since my gambling manifesto at the pizza place, she seems to regard me as the oracle of rational behavior. Of course, during the times we shoot the breeze, the oracle tries to picture what color panties she has on, if they are thong-back or covered in little flowers.) When Julie confided about a long weekend visiting Toby in the Cascades, that the first night was like old times and the next morning brought a dull, persistent rain shower that hung around until she left, I yearned for more. Her gaze moved to the gloomy spring evening and she gave her fingers a break by forking french fry after french fry into her mouth.

I sign, *Like...rain.*

She signed, *Everybody likes rain if they can get out of it. Nobody likes sleeping in it. You take so much of your life for granted and say: this is normal. Then one day you finally go: what is this crazy shit?*

We collected the chicken bones and garbage. She paused to tell me more about that weekend, that she'd rarely felt relaxed with Toby, and that she couldn't recall one good laugh. She seemed bewildered when she concluded that she felt closer to Toby the times they were apart than when they were sleeping together. I regretted not being able to do more than shrug and turn away until my condition passed and the blood returned to my heart.



If Thunder can watch you trod slowly up the mound, your tattered throwing arm in tow, he might hear Pee Wee do a little mind-screw with

his number one son. Pee Wee will try anything to jostle your rhythm. Now the brute is calling time to put more pine tar on his bat.

Ready for this ploy, you slide back to the eve of the big game, the twice-gnawed fingernails snailing imperceptibly lower, below Justine's distant deluge of words. She sleeps in a tennis skirt for you. She probably doesn't need to because you haven't been able to look at her or remember her in anything else since she wore one of those crazy-makers to your parents' club, when you ill-advisedly barfed up a bucket of possessiveness that netted you the exact opposite of the desired response: "Do you have any idea, Mr. Bucks, how many boyfriends this tennis skirt has gotten me?"

Pee Wee fiddles with his batting gloves, and you wonder how far the boyfriends have gotten in her skirt. (And if there have been any new ones.) You and Justine haven't closed the deal since a sloppy night over the XMAS holidays, so you're thinking she would've said something more along the lines of "Now," instead of giving you a look that said, *Sweetie, I'm on a roll, and there's still the New Jersey Turnpike to cover*. At some godforsaken hour, she finally talked both of you cross-eyed. You went under like an old married couple, the thick tip of your pinkie snuggled in her panty band, a solitary peck on the lips goodnight. In the morning, as a bird chirped *you-and-me-you-and-me-you-and-me*, recapturing the mood took a very short second, but she held you too close for anything other than a platonic cuddle.

"U-ump!" the runner on third moans.

The umpire jerks off his mask, "Son! Are you okay?"

Urdansky stands out of his crouch and runs out to the mound, where you're squinting at the crowd as though trying to find something you're afraid you've already lost.

Chapter 23

We get to the Phillies game late because I squeeze some last-minute pointers out of Jenna. I decompress in the warm whitewash of the stadium floods. Back in my element, I take Julie's hand and lead her under the torches toward our field-level seats. In the still during pitches, a vendor behind the Phils' dugout crows, "Red hots! Get your red hots!" I nearly trip headlong down the stairs; Julie pulls me back before I tumble us to the bottom where Salad Bowl Silveira, the hotdog vendor, is doing what hotdog vendors do best: dispensing hotdogs and making change. When he was doing what he did worst, blocking the plate for one of our underachieving American Legion teams, he allowed a passed ball through – that should've *never* been scored as a wild pitch – in the ninth of the semis of the summer league championship. The

big-boned bear was my best pal that summer. We both got college offers. I took mine, and he stuck around. There is no discernible change to the bowl haircut. So he is apparently still living at home with a mother who is committed to destroying the boy's head to save a few bucks and keep the opposite sex from ever noticing him. Salad closes his humidor and grins up the aisle at me, "What is *she* doing with *you*?"

This is not my element; this is Thunder's kingdom! And I'm cast once more in the role of stagehand.

Some of the fans here know more about my family I do. I freeze and Julie bumps against me, her breath in the pores of me scalp – is that a bald spot? I massage my crown, and have an epiphany. What better way for Julie to learn the truth about me than Salad Bowl swooping in from the concession corner? With Salad exposing me, I could rattle off an apology, and dive into the crowd. The Oaks are on their way. In first place, one win from clinching the championship bid. Julie has a Toby. A college graduate Toby, apparently without demons, real or imagined, thus free to galivant the globe saving the meek. While I, king of the minor leagues, is local only because I don't even have enough backbone to take care of business with Willie. Furthermore, the payoff is considerably jeopardized because of my absurd crush on my engaged *adviser*, who thinks I'm a deaf guy named Harry.

But what if...

What if I were to scrap the old life forever: Salad, the Phillies, the Oaks, Willie, Mom, Nikki, the mutts, Kenesaw Bucks.

Toby can't give up the red-cockaded woodpecker for a couple months.

What if Harry and Julie were to have kids? I picture Christmas morning 2012, another Christmas morning acting deaf to my children. Would that be such a big deal? My kids would just get the news earlier than most that dad never heard or understood them. But could I mutely abide as my own flesh and blood blew my money and their eardrums on The Strokes instead of The Replacements? Sensible Julie would be no help in this department, encouraging our children to make their own mistakes. My golden years would be confined to long car trips filled with Kelly Clarkson tribute CDs, that I'd have to pretend to be oblivious to.

What if the logical salvation would be to wrap the car around a tree?

I pray for stem cell research. I wish Professor Robert Goodnight and his lab coat buddies would get on their ponies. Yet I also wonder if I want someone I can fool as easily as Julie? No question I admire her for accepting the worst about me and am counting on every twinkling stadium flood that she'll outdo herself if the real Bucky ever stands up. But the fact that she can like me so much when she thinks I'm deaf tells me she is the kind of person who will be there to change my bedpan. This is a kind of love of humankind that I hope will rub off on me.

Salad Bowl trundles up the stairs, calling, "Dickbagger! You gonna stand there all day blocking traffic like your ears are broke."

I do nothing. It's Julie's nails that come flying out to give poor, sweet Salad a haircut of her own, instead of charitably explaining that am indeed aurally challenged and that, for future reference, the hotdog man might want to consider using the politically correct terminology: 'hard of hearing.' She's outraged. And I'm seized with the horrifying thought that *I'm* rubbing off on *Julie*. As Salad Bowl stops dead, confused, I glance guiltily at the construction cranes hovering over the new arena going up across the parking lot. Maybe around the time the ribbon is cut on the new corporate coliseum. Our grandchildren may be dead by the time the contractors show up.

I wave our ticket stubs at the upper deck, steer Julie around, and guide her upward. I turn back to Salad, whip my palm across my throat, and lip-synch, “Shut the fuck up!”

After wallowing in Salad’s fading call, “Bro-ski! Sorry for your...loss,” I bound up the stairs, steps behind Julie. She stamps ahead, toward the birds’ nests and rippling team banners, a mile from the field and anybody else, gloating, “That’s called a route, okay? That’s called Ohio State versus Northwestern. He totally caved. Service, Ace.”

I claw the image of Julie in a tennis skirt out of my eyes and try hatching way to slip down to the concession area, when Salad goes for more stock, to explain, “Bro-ski, I am deaf now” And hear Salad go, “Bro-ski, you have always been deaf. And you are still the biggest idiot I know. You got ‘fucking spastic’ down pat. Now get back there before *she* figures that out.” I can tell Julie I’m going to relieve myself. But if I end up waiting too long for Salad, Julie might start getting the idea that the general public literally gives me the shits.

A Phillie does a hook slide around the tag at home. The stadium roars. Seated now, Julie bumps me as she fists the air. “Yes!” she yells. I lean tenderly off the railroad tie in my buns and hope to risk a play like that again someday.

What if I ask Julie to turn me over her knee and use that aggression to dig the irritation out of my ass? I laugh.

“What?” she nudges me.

Where...your...sign?

She unfolds a paper from her purse. It reads: **Hill College Oaks First Place.** *Still think you’re unlucky?*

Not...done...yet. “But thanks for believing in us. You and the other 16 fans give us hope.”

All the drama of the last ten minutes nearly chokes her up. She signs and booms, “No. You give us hope. You make people believe in God. You—” She turned away; I hear her hiss, “—you’re engaged. He’s a student! So what if he’s your age? Rules are rules.”

The Phillies are getting thumped, but my heart leaps since I know the rules say the game isn’t over until at least nine innings are in the book. Julie and I have at least another five, and if the Phils come back and send the game into extras...

Julie comes around, her face shining in the stadium juice.

I’m hot with jealousy for something that was never mine and am afraid never can be. I want dibs on everything inside her head, sweater, and pants. It’s easier to sign than say, *You...like...me...or...like...helping...me? If...not...your...job.*

“There’s – there’s something so unusual about you—” Her face darkens with embarrassment.

My bloodstream rushes. The truth is a wild beast, sprouting more heads.

If...I...could...hear? I demand in sign.

“If you could hear...Well, first, you’d have to tell me what my laugh is like. Someone once said it sounds like uncontrollable indigestion.” She brays and the pigeons flap off the banner poles. “See?” she points.

I slap my thigh and laugh with her.

The laughter lasts past midnight and back to the Hill rose garden behind the administration building, where I try to keep from looking back. Julie darts ahead, weaving through the labyrinth of roses. But behind me is that awful, unbroken darkness and the unrelenting slurp of black ooze.

Julie reverses course, tagging me with a silly expression and taking off again. She's fast for a mountain climber, all motion like a bobblehead, drunk on whatever is possessing her, and I'm suddenly the responsible one. She sets the pace but I key in on her belt loop so I can hook her if that doll's face spills thornward. She seems to want me to return the favor of catching a friend from a freefall. She stumbles, I grab, spin her up flush, leaning away from my chest, in my arms, expectant. Reaching to the right, I snap off a yellow rose in the fog of a hanging lantern. She refuses it.

"Yellow roses suggest waning interest," she signs and says.

He get a red one.

"Good recovery, LaMar. But you love baseball." Hers is a good recovery as well.

"Yes, I do."

"Have you ever loved anything as much?"

Not...yet.

I interlock my fingers around her waist. She presses the red rose to my nostrils, and showed me her teeth. "Why aren't there any deaf players in the major leagues?"

Been...few.

"Maybe you'll be the next."

My head's a rocket, my heart a train. I'm certain of only one thing: the scampering coming up from behind. An old coach? The *Philadelphia Inquirer*? The wind howls up my neck. Straining still like a tightrope-walker, I don't look back or even flex my jaw. I want to turn loose the rising raft of shame. My blood stops. My veins, arteries, and valves clog with scum. But nothing in Julie's face belies another presence. The only sounds in the garden are the weeping willow, the birds' warning that rain is coming, and the tick of her heart.

"I wouldn't bet the farm," I distantly say.

"Why can't you take a compliment?"

"I'd like to be known for other reasons."

Seductively she mouths, "I'll bet the farm you will."

I'd like to say, *Look at the ass and legs on you.* Instead, I sigh, "You're something."

"Must be my new Chanel make-up."

"No. Just same old Julie."

Her lips open. Bucky LaMar is seconds from having her right there in the roses til Kenesaw Bucks pipes up, "Have you run this by the woodpecker?"

In a red-cockaded fluster, Julie chucks the flower onto the hood of a parked car. Under the brown sky, she waves goodbye, not wanting me to see how carbonated and shaken up she is, though I hear her cursing me with every fizz. I run six steps with the thought of turning her around. But when she twirls herself by the vines under the willow's umbrella, I know the damage is done. "Someday you'll thank me."

At least I have caught her from falling into a predictably lame outing in the sack.

I hope I can sleep her off, both feeling invincible for turning down sex (am I nuts?) and pining for the days when girls were the last ones picked for Wiffle Ball. The waves of testosterone are punishing. The sheets are humid and sticky. I dearly want to salvage things, to run through the newly falling rain and bang on Julie's door...I know where she lives. But something else has followed me back from the rose garden. When my head thuds the pillow, I see her, leaning over me, a waitress with a drink tray – Mom? Justine? Sook? The barmaid at B A? I tense off the pillow, and the waitress is replaced by a billow of a man, watching and waiting, and there are others, too, that I get up and chase around the room – stubbing my big toe

in the process – and take swings at until they all go back to fuzz or vanish altogether. One time in the flop room – when the air was so black from the rain outside you could imagine you were anywhere and believe it – I saw a man wearing a hat. The face was blank, but I knew this was my father. Instead of running him off, I rolled out of the mattress and skinned across the floor on my knees, hugging at the ankles and shins but gathering only air and finding the #12 pendant sitting on the cool linoleum like a witch’s offering, though I could’ve sworn I’d left it on the nightstand before shutting down.

The shadows and visions and rain finally wear me out.

I don’t know how long the door-bulb has been flickering. I push my watch up to my nose. 1a.m. – the usual hour for Sarah to make the moves with Al. Al’s dead to the world, so I jump into my pants, get the door, and almost pass Julie shivering in the hall, water dripping off her bangs. I lead her under the exit sign, which is like a taillight on a dark, country highway. She signs that she got Toby on his cell phone and they had their first real conversation in weeks.

As she gets more animated, she speaks with her signs, “I told him I’d like to put everything on hold. Toby said they’re doing such great work up there, he’s torn about hurrying back. That’s where he needs to be. Not here.”

“Think he was seeing someone?”

“We’ve been engaged less than a year. He never really said he wasn’t, but you know, how you can just tell?”

I grunt my last death threat (I hope) for the Duke quarterback.

“We agreed there’s a difference between loving a person and loving a relationship. Neither of us loved this relationship.” She tells me that with Toby, her mountain climbing partner, her feet had never left the ground.

That’s all I need to know to be in the room in no time and shoveling Al into the hall. I flip on the overhead light to see if this is really true. There is, in fact, a major babe only in the room with me. Out of habit, I start to excuse myself and leave.

“Not so fast.” Julie cinches his golden tufts in a fist.

Aaaaah: someone competent with long nails, who’ll pull my hair and give me I-like-to-touch-you head-scratches. I hug her close, my nose smashing against the sweat, rain, and perfume. Hiking my arm behind her, I whiff myself and then remember showering before turning in.

“I don’t have loads of experience at this.”

“What was your favorite subject in high school?” she signs and says. She pirouettes and slides her hand up my t-shirt.

Thinking she means cheerleaders, I laugh too long and hysterically, missing the real joke about Harold LaMar’s ballet days.

“Kind of a toss-up, but – Latin. Yeah. Quite the scholar if I do say so.”

She massages my thick shoulders and drags her fingers over my chest, down my now-flat stomach. She clutches my wrists and announces deliberately loudly enough to make me wobble: “*This* will be much easier than Latin!”

“Latin was a pretty sweet time,” I can’t hear myself croak, and yet my ears have never been clearer, counting every drop in the gutters and every plum tossed from the trees into the rushing water in the meadow. I peck Julie’s hair, eyes, and nose over and over until her lips find mine. After a kiss like an ocean spray, she mouths and signs, “Do you have a condom?”

Why?

“You’re so sweet!” (I believe that’s code for *what a loser*).

She goes to cut the light. My heavy forearm sweeps clumsily around her waist. “No condoms. But I do have a doubleheader in the morning.”

“At least,” she breathes, flipping the switch.

Tensing, I try to find a rhythm. I want this to be perfect, but I’m fumbling at every button and tongue-twist. She lies back on my bed and opens to me, and suddenly, inexplicably my gawky, impetuous movements become fluid and precise, just like swinging a bat for the first time in years.

Soon, before the bubble gum-dawn shows on her cheeks, Julie and I are making love.

And except for the three times I have to get up to blow my nose, the guy who supposedly can’t hear has gotten all the feedback he needs. I fall asleep in her arms, listening to her murder the Beach Boys’s ballad “Surfer Girl.”

Elsewhere the storm threw an old windmill in a ditch, snapped a power line, downed some trees, and blew tiles off the field house roof. Indoors, however, things couldn’t have gone smoother, even in the leaky garage-cum-home office where long, ferret fingernails scratched out an email to the registrar’s office at the Texas School for the Deaf that began:

Dear Sirs,

I am inquiring about a student of mine, Mr. Harold LaMar, who attended your school from 1997-1999...

Chapter 24

Julie zips her jeans over the most powdery blue panties I have ever beheld in groggy morning light.

What...about...doubleheader? I sign.

She sits beside me and signs, *Can I get a rain check, Slugger?*

“Okay,” I yawn. “Are we getting married?”

“I don’t know yet,” she laughs.

“You think you’re pregnant?”

“No.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“I’m on the pill.”

Phew. Got that out of the way. They should change my nickname to Smoothie.

“So, Latin was a pretty sweet time? How in the world did I miss that?”

“Didn’t *carpe diem*, Ms. Ross.”

She steps into her boots, kisses me bye, and pauses on her way out, “I mean I didn’t catch it in your transcript.”



What if Thunder is there to follow your eyes as you check the scoreboard and confirm that Princeton is leading by one, after picking up the go-ahead run in the top of the ninth, and that the potentially final count is down to 0-2? What if Thunder looks to the horizon when you do at the wavy cornstalks beyond the fence, where the crow turns smooth and effortless on the slick breeze...

Then you look at Justine and an old song runs around your head.

He’s got the whole world in his hands...

Because all you have to do is lob a set-up pitch outside and come right back with junk inside. At the very thought, you flare up with hope and wonder.

He’s got the whole wide wor-orld in his hands...

You can practically see the 1-2 offering, Pee Wee’s whiff, the fans erupting off their duffs, and Justine racing onto the field under Thunder’s watchful benediction. Not one to celebrate another guy’s flameout (especially before it’s actually happened) you decide you won’t dally on the field after it’s done – anxious as you are to begin a more mature phase of your life.

Bye fools, hello constant sex.

You shake off Urdansky’s signals over and over until Coach Rudden yells, “Hey, Pitch!” and makes a show of putting his hands on his hips, the sign to waste one wide.

“How stupid does he think I am,” you mumble. Finding the ball in your glove, you nod, kicks, and come forward. But the dirt is soft underfoot as you push off and you begin the downward slide off the rubber. A wild pitch is coming that will score the tying run from third. Unless you release the ball too early and it coasts into Pee Wee’s wheelhouse.

Chapter 25

There's a break in the storm. Through the clean panes of glass, the sky is a shrinking dome of pale blue, surrounded by mercurial clumps that blacken and spin together. What had started as a perfect day has passed onto male-pattern baldness in reverse. The field has taken a thorough drenching, leaving waterholes deep enough to fish in.

Like the circular refrain of "Muskrat Love," I can't halt the haunting memory of all the loneliness before Hill. I slide back to the window above B A where many an hour was burned daydreaming about a kiss or the fantasy of sex with anyone other than myself – then afterward, the concept of friendship. And here I've made it happen. I've acquired both: sex and quality companionship. All I had to do was be myself! Well, just about. Surely no one would ever mistake me for Dad, not the way I'd like them to, anyhow. Then again, whose bed was the sweet, sweet action in? Whose bed was the goddamn dream in? Not the flop room's bed. I strut to the mirror. The cowardly new world has all the markings of reality, but it is also the other perishable side of reality. I view me from both sides: looking at my reflection and looking at myself looking at my reflection. I tweak my left nip until I howl. I spit on my palm and slick down a forest of rogue curls so at least I don't look like a sleaze. I tell my image, "Deaf *is* better. Not better, per se. But *I* am better for it." Already I'm using foreign turns of phrase to describe myself. I picture Julie under me, my plum come hell or high water. At some juncture, I'll venture to remove the filter from our intimacy and croon ala Enrique Iglesias, "There's something I have to say, my plummette. You know that whole bit about my name being Harold?" I giggle at how silly it will sound. I check the retreat of my hairline for the first time since coming to Hill. Bald as shit. Brad Pitt won't be playing me in the sequel to "The Thunder Bucks Story."

Al busts in and catches me measuring the fallout from my hairline to my earlobe. "At least those nose hairs are hanging tough," he smirks.

I quickly pluck out the long curlies. "Thank you, Al. I do have surplus nose hairs. But you, my friend, will never have calves. And P.S.: good idea changing the subject."

"The subject is we got three games left. One win, and we're in the championship."

"I like your attitude, son. Were you thinking maybe let's toss the ball, swing the stick?" I sigh arrogantly, "Can't let the old stick get rusty."

"Tell me you didn't hit *that*?"

"Lingo, Al. She's classy."

"And P.S.: you're not. But then I look at Carmen Electra. What the hell was that broad thinking about?"

"You mean divorcing Dennis Rodman?"

Al sighs his frustration.

Jealous? I sign.

"Are you eff-ing kidding me? Don't you get this? Right now you feel tops."

"Tip-top, Al."

"Ms. Ross doesn't. Believe me. She won't feel tops until she's got everything. How long til she figures you out? I didn't need the blessing of rooming with you to know what I know."

What...know? I sign suspiciously.

"You are such a douche."

“If by douche, you mean that I cleanse and purify your mind of impurities and muddled thinking, then, yes, I believe I *am* a douche.”

“Isn’t the dean engaged? You’re doing more than cleansing minds, buddy. You’re destroying lives.”

“Whoa, there. I may not have your style or sophistication, Al, but I haven’t screwed over a good friend and *teammate*.”

Or have I?

The realization hits me like the clap. I grab gonads and my face squinches as I envisioned my confession coldcocking Julie; her “no-no-no’s” spewing at the sky; her tears scorching my chest like cinders. In the heat of her theoretical pain, I reach back and cup my achey left flank. I brutally squeeze until a flame of puss squirts out. In a breaking voice, I say, “You’re going to the devil, Aloysius.”

“Who?”

“You and your little redhead is who. The flames of hell.”

Al, who is not a very good person but is an exemplary Catholic, scowls. “Chunk, this is half a mil worth of therapy talking: keep lying. Let us pray that she’s as stupid as you are.”

“What about Booeey and Sarah?”

Keep lying.

He has a point. If Julie investigates the Latin class slip and delivers me a weepy ‘say it ain’t so,’ I will have no choice but to hot-tail it to Mars or beyond. Same as Willie probably will do once I get around to answering his question to me about why I’d come back to Philadelphia and dragged his ass to the Cheese Stake Grill. Now if I check out before the season is won, I will have done nothing but hurt people.

Glare cuts the floor in slits. The sun rearranges the sky. The wind works the field like a paper towel soaking up spilt coffee. I rush to the window and quake as the trees canopy over the little baseball diamond at the bottom of the hill, almost tumbling en masse and seeming to mop up any remaining moisture. Home plate twinkles.

Chapter 26

During the rainout, Ronnie Tischler went downtown to the Cheese Stake. There was a sign in the window that said, “Now Hiring.” He filled out an application and waited at the register for Charlie Potatoes to finish his third crap of the day.

“As you can see we are an equal opportunity employer,” he said, indicating the chubby – no, pregnant – waitress, who was behind the stainless steel counter, flipping pickle slices at a framed picture high above the grill, underneath a sign that read “Employee of the Month.” After each miss, she hissed in an Asian tongue Tisch could not read. The manager continued, “But we need someone who can carry on a conversation in English over the phone.”

Tisch pointed at the pickle-splattered picture of Bucky LaMar and laboringly said, “He-- deaf.”

“Only heard what he wanted.”

“Bucky Lamar?”

“LaMar? You got the Bucky part right.”

Tischler waited for the manager to work things out in his head. But the man just shrugged, “Perhaps so,” and went back to wearing out his colon.

Literally with a head of steam, Tisch started toward the house where he knew he’d find Aunt Arminta. While crunching down used drug paraphernalia and high-stepping over winos, he considered Goodnight’s advice about looking out for his own interests. He hopped a train back to Middleburg. But before visiting the professor, he got on-line and sought the case law on the fraudulent use of federal funding and the sentencing guidelines for a repeat offender.

After an undigestable dinner, Tisch chucked the Cheese Stake shirt into the rushing creek behind campus and wondered if those were his own fortunes drifting away.

Chapter 27

“Are you some kind of starfucker?”

“I’m working on a proof, Coach Chance.”

Professor Robert Goodnight snaps another picture. I bobble another grounder.

“It’s making the kid unconscious, man,” Willie explains. He willd himself not to kick the horse’s ass who is tidying the bats and helmets in rows by his feet at the end of the bench.

The professor lays his eye on the viewfinder and says, “*Self*-conscious, Willie. Everybody makes errors. The important thing is to learn from them. And of course,” (snap), “to not repeat them.”

Another comes my way, I wean it off the turf, kick second, and make the easy turn.

Goodnight eases off the telephoto lens. “Just like that.”

The Oaks, down 8-7 in the bottom of the last, have the dregs of the order coming up.

Willie works out a series of pre-dreads from his afro on his way to the third base coaching box and signs to the Hill leadoff, Mel Hunt, *Get on any way you can*.

The Oaks’s chunky stalwart behind the dish grits his dirty teeth, but with no stick to speak of, throws his gut across and takes one for the team. That brings up the number nine batter, the pitcher – Crazy Sain. The players call him “Crazy” not because he’s dizzy or daffy, but because he has a big fastball that has trouble finding the plate. Guys say that when Sain is feeling it, you’d be off the reservation to use the bat for anything other than self-defense. In the losing days, when winning was something the Oaks could only take pride in making other teams earn, this was good for a late-inning chuckle and spawned the expression, ‘Crazy Sain and watch your brain.’

Crazy milks a freebie, and both runners advance on a passed ball in the next count. With Hillies on second and third, the team is suddenly in the catbird to win the division-clincher without the ringer’s contribution.

“You gotta be kiddin’ me,” Goodnight mutters loudly, and lets the Nikon drop like a millstone around his neck.

Even the professor knows that a base hit can win it, and a fly ball or wild pitch can knot it – a dandy situation for the next two Oak batsmen, Bratty Matty Zernial and Al Pagano if they hadn’t lifted weights before the game and got tied up in their arms. Zernial dinks to the pitcher and Al pops up to the catcher. The Oak runners are marooned on second and third for me. I’m secretly pleased. Julie has finally shown up after making me suffer seven sloppy innings during which Goodnight’s camera clicks felt like nails going into a casket I’m sure she was up the hill preparing for me with the words *caveat emptor* carved at the head. But she’s wearing a juicy

getup just for me. I know she wants to see me ice the game in front of her. Her face seems under a steady breeze, and I gotta believe the Latin slip might go the way of a peanut shell tossed from a Ferris wheel. It might blow into the next county or drift downstream, if she doesn't look spade up too much dirt. When she had come up shouting, "Go Oaks!" I'd turned with a desperate kind of smoochy face, and just in time remembered himself, acted tangled up with a wasp, which Willie jumped in to help flail (landing a couple good knocks on my big dumb noggin in the process).

Clumping through the grass away from Goodnight's renewed camera's clicks, I hear Julie say, "Can I get one of those when you're done, Professor?"

"When I'm *done*, you can have all of them."

Willie intercepts me on the way to the batter's box, and we begin our conference in sign and straight-lipped voice over.

"Why didn't we change my first name, too?"

"We did. You insisted on being Bucky. He ain't taking pictures of your name anyhow."

"I've fanned three times for him today." I elbow at the pitcher. "I'd maul him if you'd let me. He's got three pitches: slow, slower, and slowest."

"Can I get a batter?" the umpire says in a monotone meant to remind Willie the man is paid by the game, not the hour. Plucking at his beard, Willie signs gibberish and without moving his lips says, "We got two more shots. We'll do it when Goodnight's not around."

"Not around? You gonna rub him out?"

"He's got lab the rest of the week, fool."

"Then blow him up. Because he'll hear about it after lab."

The professor's camera flashes, blinding me like the sizzle of dimming stadium lights. I rub my eyes and the whiteness breaks into dogwood petals sliding over the ground, and I see myself, face buried in hands as I stagger off a mound. Willie follows my gaze but finds only his nephew, glaring back stiff and resentful. Willie mumbles, "Don't you dare look at me like that. I learned ASL for you, bitch."

Willie tags my helmet. "I want a *strikeout* strikeout. Not a homerun strikeout."

Willie Chance may not be the most honest person in the world, but if he says something, he means it. But one run short and two out in the ninth, the bat feels a murderous itch in my palms. The base runners lurk off second and third. A car honks on the road behind the dorm. The infielders pound their gloves. A buzzard circles the outfield and shits on the centerfielder's cap. The pitcher, whose fastball couldn't break glass, rocks.

I want it over before anyone can detect the shame soaking my drawers and fogging my eyes. Grimy sweat pinstripes my neck. I flash on the last shot at the carnival. *Why hadn't I taken it?* I choke the life out of the bat, felt his arms tighten, wave at two meatballs, and strike out on a fifty-eight footer that brains a worm. I take the other team's pelting of aw-haws and oh-yeahs from the batter's box. The sixteen fans leave the stands, some on foot, some getting in cars. My teammates still want nothing to do with me, except for a parade of four.

Jenna pats me sympathetically on the good side of my rear.

Booey's jaw hangs forlornly as he staggers past.

Tisch signs, *S-U-C-K-Y*, then intones, "Sucky!"

And Al, who is divided by his manic delight at my suffering and his profound empathy for my plight, snipes shrilly from the gate, "What the hell was that? A nine iron?"

I draw a line across the outer edge of home plate, where I should've swung, and slam the bat into the plate's worn, rubber face. Aluminum bats are supposedly unbreakable, but as I

shake the stump in my fist, and as the barrel cartwheels in the dirt halo surrounding home, I guess there is a first for everything. Looking around the cheerless cloud-lit afternoon, he smelled the new construction slide through the outfield trees.

Julie's waiting, signing with a player's buddy. I muster a shrug and go toward the field house. Goodnight's car is still here. The professor is behind the wheel, avidly trying to pick a winner.

I smell the intoxicating *Breck* in Julie's hair before she catches up to me. Her eyes are the same ones I'd seen in Al's room, but there is a **Closed** sign in their windows. If she's having second thoughts about last night or concerns about student-teacher regulations, I'll have to kabash the conversation fast. Maybe we can meet again in the rose garden at midnight. And though I can still hear last night's rain and wish it hadn't stopped, there is now, in addition, a thunderous scampering and above that, clearly, the devil tapping his foot. I look for the sound.

What are you doing?

"Who?"

You, Harold! Julie giggles and weaves her fingers in mine. (Why do girls fall so fast?) "You did your best. That's all anyone can ask. It's not like you threw the game," she signs and says with a laugh.

I turn clamshell white. My ball cap and curls are sweaty. I square my jaw, bold as I can, bracing for an uppercut. This only makes her more bubbly.

What you need is a hot shower.

The scampering builds. I lean left for a fearful glimpse around Julie and make out Goodnight through his windshield. He's picking the hell out of his nose.

"What am I doing?" I cry at the silo. I scrunch my ball cap with both hands and the hammering noise climaxes and finally eases. Just people getting off the train, hustling to their cars in their dress shoes. Successful people, professionals. I slump, stoop-shouldered. By the time I stop hearing things and signs, *Can...I...get...shower...check*, Julie is tearing up the hill and through the woods, hissing at herself, probably wondering if one hot night is worth the pot she is stewing in. Goodnight reads my sign, examines a boogie on the tip of his forefinger, screws it to the pantheon on the dash, and pulls the Olds out of the parking lot.

Chapter 28

Plump sparrows sit on the wires above the train tracks. I haven't spoken to Julie and miss her terribly. It has been exactly 29 hours and 16 minutes since, "I had her whole wide booty in my hands," I hum. I ball my fists. As the flames of love turn low, the desire for victory becomes oppressive.

Nothing cures a bellyache or a common cold or a misunderstanding like a win.

There was enough gas in the mower for the pony-tailed sophomore, Hartung, during a midnight run, to make the infield grass stubble. But with a week and a torrential shower since its last cutting, the outfield grass is waving and heading toward the protected wetland list. The equipment is stacked neatly.

Lefty Lopez, the cross-eyed string bean who plays left, and who, like Doyle, the freshman in right, has been giving Tisch a wide berth, had fashioned a bat and helmet rack out of ash for his engineering project. He presented it to the team in a ceremony before the game. He'd even adjusted the measurements to accommodate Booe's oversized cap and bat. Jenna and some of her friends had pulled an all-nighter to take the uniforms' lettering – the names of the players being a luxury beyond – and numbers back to their original unchloroxed crimson with magic markers. Luke and Jerry had painted the tottering scoreboard high-gloss black and 3/4 of the rusty backstop Fenway green. The Oak express had arrived – late, but it had arrived. Yet I, after breaking my trusty bat in two, can't find a new pipe I like. I have swung them all.

The Hens's pitcher has an overhand deuce that lounges in the glare of the silo dome and seems to magically appear, dripping on the outside corner. The team's run production has declined in the last few games, everyone from McDougal to Zernial, so Willie has shuffled the batting order. No thanks to me, the Oaks have put up four. The junior, Lefty Lopez – with whom I've spent weeks turning a chronic spinball into a curveball that breaks off the table – in only his second start in three years, holds the Hens to five, only two earned, through the afternoon.

"Another one-run duel," Willie says and pounds the bongo.

We circle around him before taking our last hacks. He tells us champions win the close ones, and losing by a run is no better than losing by 50. He smiles and winks even though inside he's a potboiler and outside, after signing, he crosses toes on top of fingers. Because of the rainouts and the school year drawing to a close, the last three games have fallen on consecutive days. The already-slimpy Oak pitching staff is verging on anorexic. The rotation hasn't come back to Al Pagano, and Willie wanted to rest him for Alice Deal. So the offense has to win here or produce the run to send the game into extras.

Willie grabs my arm. "If we tie it up, gonna bring you in for the close."

"What if Goodnight calls lab early and shows when I'm throwing flames?"

"You're right. First things first. Pick up a run. Pick up another. Then—"

The bottom of the ninth starts with Al looking at called strike three. Snooter McDougal, known mostly for his glove, just misses a slider and flies to center. I wait for Willie to say something to Booe, on-deck, but the coach has already taken off his cap and is picking at his kinks to the refrain of, "To-morrow, to-morrow, I love ya to-morrow..."

I move quickly to Booe and mouth slowly, "I bat after you. Tischler bats after me. He has not hit the side of a barn in weeks. When you get on base..."

Booe's eyes dart aimlessly. "Trying to believe."

The kid's chest is fluttering with raw panic. "That's what I'm talking about, Moose. WHEN YOU GET ON BASE, and I get a hit, KEEP GOING. You're out, or you're home. No stops on the way."

Booey signs something about molasses.

"I don't care if it takes you a year! The outfielders don't have arms! If you're on base, and I get a hit, don't stop running until you cross the plate."

"Terrified," he ekes.

"Even Sammy Sosa gets terrified, Moose. What *we're* talking about has the same degree of difficulty as pissing on your leg."

Booey frowns. *Then stop calling me 'Mouse'.*

"Not *mouse*. Not mouse. Moose! As in Algonquin for twig-eater!"

Booey's eyes are wide open. But their hidden doors, that lately have let so many words go freely in and out, are latched shut.

I Bullwinkle my fingers.

Booey mimics the gesture, waggling finger antlers. "You mean 'Moose'?" he asks.

"Yes! I mean Moose! As in I'm so hungry I could eat a—" I touch Booey's cheek the way my father had done to me the night before the state tournament. (The next day, P.S., we got bludgeoned to pieces). "Moose, I KNOW YOU CAN!"

This was something Sarah didn't know, who had been waiting for hours behind the visitors' bus, poised to make her grand entrance and carry out Al's directions. The way things were headed for the Oaks, Al didn't think there would be an opportunity today for the redheaded Venus to showcase her talents. And then Booey did the perfectly unpredictable, smashing a changeup to the fence and legging out a double. Sarah took her cue.

As if pausing during an afternoon jog, she rests her hooters over the chest-high fence and pouts for Booey. When the moose sees that, he stands nearly 8-foot high on the bag. His fist practically brings rain. Sarah quickly touches her cheek, as if she felt a drop.

I draw my fourth bat of the day from the rack.

None have worked yet. I'm not real optimistic about putting the ball in play, but I tell myself to swing deep. A huge cloud rumbles across the sky. It blocks the sun and dulls the silo's shimmer. I dig in. I wait on a curveball's high cascade, stick the bat out, and single up the middle. As the ball vanishes in the high outfield grass behind short, I head for two and feel the mantle of a baseball genius swish around me.

Booey pound past third, his 14 triple-E cinderblocks shaking the earth. Once he clears Willie's flailing stop signals, he glances aside to see if Sarah is still watching. Then he freezes stiff in the basepath between third and home! He tears off his batting helmet and pushes the blond scraggles from his eyes.

Al is twirling a bat on his shoulder, and with the way he's been at the plate lately, we're all wondering if he even knows what the thing is for and whether Willie should've dropped him from the line-up altogether, not just down to the number nine slot, where he won't be needing a bat for an eternity anyway. At the moment though, the club is for squeezing, to show Sarah the bulging snake tattoos on his forearm. In return, she strokes Al's tattoos with her red nails. She tickles Al's chin dimple and smile in a way that none of us – including Booey – have known her to smile before – even during the five minutes she listened to Booey's small talk and laughed at his feeble jokes.

Sarah signs to Al, *Later, can I suck your cock?*

Al signs, *Later? You can and you may, now.*

Booey goes berserk. Hitting his begging knees outside the chalk line, he wails like there are nothing but boogies out tonight.

Willie falls like he's been shot, convulses on his back, and foams at the mouth.

Sarah ogles the shattered behemoth, undercupps her boobs as though they are canon balls, which makes both teams and umps look, and signs, *Let me make this perfectly clear: if you were the last man on earth, I'd be licking some girl's clit.* Then she flips Booey the double-bird.

Despite the lengthy break in the action and the boner-fest, there is still time for Booey to score. The second baseman, shortstop, and all three outfielders have been fruitlessly sweeping the area for the ball I hit, while their coach rails over and over, "What is this shit?"

Willie springs up and bolts over to Booey. "Come on, Sweetness. Come on, Sugar Plum," he tearfully urges.

The Hen shortstop bushwhacks the grass so hard his glove flies off and, to his genuine surprise, the ball squirts out and rolls teasingly onto the infield dirt.

Run, bitch! Willie signs to Booey.

Booey squares. And for the first time in his life he seems ready to turn the anger outward, then stops again. He must be thinking that the energy released in the impending crash at home plate could kill untold millions of mosquitoes in a central Minnesota summer. So what could it do to the poor bastard waiting for the ball, bracing for wreckage, all to impress some girl, who was probably in the process of dumping him for the next chump? And how would Booey profit? A World Series ring won't bring back his – was she ever really his? – girl.

Al chews a blade of grass and tells Sarah to go.

Booey jerks like a marionette in the wind, in a rundown between third and home.

The Hillies show unsparing spirit, kicking over bats and spiking helmets; only Luke turns passively to his twin. *Does his pussy hurt?*

You mean the goddamn fruit? The lightweight private school piece of shit?

Think he's a fairy?

Brother, he just got upgraded from latent to blatant.

When they tag Booey, I punt my helmet into center field.

In the eighth inning Willie remembered this is his eighth anniversary. He tells me he'd better show with flowers in hand if he plans on ever sleeping with a woman again. I tell him red is the color and ask if Mrs. Chance has been ragging him of late.

"Put the dish in the sink. *Why* is there a dish in the sink? You're gonna wear *that*? That don't match.' Has she been raggin' me? When aint' she?"

I wonder if that's the kind of fun Julie and I might be having someday.

"Will you get the bums ready for tomorrow – last shot at the championship?"

I commence by pinning Al against the barn with an iron clamp around his thick neck.

"What was *that*?" I inquire.

Al hoarsely retorts something like, "Notice I've stunk at the plate since the rainout? I can't live with myself. I thought: okay. Maybe I am sick. But you, LaMar—" Al grins merrily, "you're terminal!"

"*I'm* terminal?"

"The lengths you'll go for a piece."

I clamp tighter. "You may not call her a piece."

“There you go again. Like you have something real. Something worth defending. You’ve succeeded at deceiving everyone, even yourself. I don’t want to end up like that. So I’m taking action. I figured it was safer to tell Booeey in a crowd, with him out there and me armed, over here by the gate. Sometimes rejection is easier to cope with if you’re angry. Did I anticipate a complete puss-out? No. To the contrary. The truth would set him free. And he would burn up the bases at top speed.”

“You know what, Al?”

“What?”

“You have good oral skills.”

The rest of the Oaks, who’d given up on their inert pagers, look plaintively at me. I glower so many different shades of death they trip over themselves to the field house. Only Booeey remains, laid out like road kill across the base path.

Al wheezes, “Let go of me, Chunk. I did the honorable thing.”

“You’re mean, Al. *Mean*. There’s a difference.”

I sit on Booeey’s chest and hop up and down until the oaf throws me off and wags a foot-long finger in my face.

“That’s it!” I exclaim. “That’s what we want. So what kind of name is *Booeey* anyway?”

“My name.”

“You got a real person’s name?”

“Wayne. That’s what the birth certificate says. But nobody ever...”

“Wayne, I got a blind date for you.”

“Blind? I’ve never been out with a blind girl.”

“Not blind.” I squeeze in a migraine. “She’s deaf, Wayne. You’ll meet her tonight.”

“But our last hope is tomorrow’s game. We have to win it.” His eyes fill with the biggest tears I’ve ever seen.

“I know. We also needed to win today’s game. Did you have a date last night?”

Al is hesitating at the gate. He drops his equipment bag and comes over, nodding remorsefully.

“Hats off to you, Al,” I say. “I take most of it back.”

With the deepest sincerity, he nods to me, then signs to Booeey, *Way to show your speed*.

The moose yelps at the incoming stars, and I cheer him on as he galumphs after Al into the field house.

There’s still Tisch to deal with, patrolling his turf, surveying the fallout from my helmet’s landing in center. The grass in the immediate area was vaporized.

I mouth, “I got it.”

Tisch boils.

“You want to swing,” I ask, bobbing, weaving, and raising my fists. “Make your move.”

Tischler boots the helmet high into the air. I crouch, ready to spring at his chest. But Tisch falls to his knees, and I’m glad I held off on the samurai move because I would’ve flown over him and gone kersplat. Following his pointing finger, I find the source of Tisch’s real outrage: an interlocking, Varsity-bold 240-point **A D** burnt into the earth.

“Looks like Alice has been in our house. Didn’t have the manners to say ‘hello.’ You wanna do something about it?”

Tisch nods tentatively.

“Then hit the fuckin’ ball.”

Lanky arms flexing, Tisch utters words to me for the first time. “Look, dude. I despise them. We all do. Shiftiest good-for-nothing white boys on the planet.”

“Worse than me?”

“Little bit.”

“All right. Get Al and Booeey – Wayne, you know, the moose – and meet me behind the history building in half an hour. If this comes off—” I do part in sign and part in words.

“*No...more* Chunk, *no...more* Roll Model, *no...more* Good Gourd Almighty.”

“Have you looked at yourself recently?” I lift my Henley and the only bulges and protrusions are abdominal muscles. Things are looking up.

Al is experiencing pangs of humanity. Tisch is liquidating his rage. It only took Willie to the 8th inning to remember his anniversary. Booeey is dealing with man-stuff: grief and reality. I have abs again and am one win away from having Willie over a barrel. And Julie...Julie’s broken off an engagement to a solid individual, has broken a sacred school policy by getting involved with a student, and not just any old student, one that’s deceived her in every way imaginable.

As Tisch speeds away, I go to home plate, exhume the cigar butt from the batter’s box, wipe it clean, and plug it into my teeth, where it belongs at times such as this.

Chapter 29

In the lot behind the History Building, adjacent to the crumble of bricks that Physical and Audiological Sciences share, Al hot-wires Goodnight’s Olds. Wayne is on the lookout for the not-yet-tenured professor. I leave them to slide a hastily composed letter under Julie’s door, while Tisch delivers another letter to a room in the girl’s dormitory. When the current and former shortstops sprint around opposite corners, Luke and Jerry doles out plugs of tobacco and the heart of the Hill Oaks’s batting order – and two Major League scrubs – swing off campus. I’m the only who has every possessed a license at one time or another, so I drive. From the rearview, I monitor Wayne and Al’s strange tranquility in the backseat. I look for clues to how

Al is worming out of a full-scale whupping. Maybe thinks are not so complex. Maybe you can have the body of a gladiator and be an incurable pansy inside. Maybe some friendships can survive the two-timing of the hottest deaf babe on Earth. Maybe I will have to punch Al for his good fortune.

This is early May, which means daylight savings time. So the sun is fuzzy on top of the western tree line, ebbing off the mansions on the Main Line. The glitter-green Olds putters through the Alice Deal campus, hops a choice curb, jackknives across a women's field hockey game, and widens the doorway in the wooden cornstalk fence – to no introduction whatsoever.

The Crusaders, who have been practicing cut-off throws from the outfield to home, are in awe.

22 pounds ago my butt cheeks would've comfortably straddled the hole in the driver's side seat; now I have to use hamstring muscles to ride above the chasm like a jockey in the homestretch. Having been on one of these junkets in a former life, I know that you go straight for the center fielder and the rest will haul ass. But I can't help shouting encouragement – as if the bumper's polished chrome weren't enough – to the gangly kid whose legs wiggle like branches in a gale: "This ain't no Corolla, slim! I'd move if I was you!" The kid dodges. I cough smoke around the butt of the cigar and swerve for the infielders.

As the car runs neatly along the dugout's edge, bodies dive headfirst into the hole. I'm sure the Oaks have never cried like *this* before. I almost swallow the last bite of cigar, from laughing at them, too. The plush green peels away under the steelbelts and I notice that except for the tacky cornstalk fence, the field is much like Princeton's. I sob a tinge of loss and separation, then step on the gas. Clambering on top of the dugout, Coach Silver Duke Donnelly pulls his pants up to his armpits and squeals with the Olds as we doughnut between home plate and the pitcher's mound, shaving the finely coifed infield bald.

I crack the window. "Board shoulda sprung for the astro, Coach!"

The Deal players reconstitute with a blizzard of bats and balls. I throw it in reverse, and the equipment falls in front with only a few dings in Goodnight's hood. I goad the Olds slowly and unevenly over the objects. We squash the stainless steel bat rack.

In a moment of supplement-fueled insanity, two of Alice's savages defy the roaring mass to rescue their favorite bats. "Get them-muh!" Tisch cries, and I floor it after the beasts until they flee behind the visitors' dugout where they can be heard mewling for a treat.

Wayne swallows his chaw and a patina spread to his moose lips. I pull us up to the batter's box in time for Wayne to thrust his long neck out the window and blow lunch onto the dish.

You can forget all the championships. This is the one day Alice Deal will remember above all others.

Only Bobby Blanks, Deal's fair-haired fireballer, still needs some jesusing. Throughout the demolition derby, he has flipped a ball to himself on the pitcher's rubber as though nothing – not even a nuclear attack – could get him off the field. The narcissistically nasty half Rip Van Winkle beard-thing that dangles from his chin, rather than looking witty or mysterious, only confirms the heft and beauty of a natural born paperweight.

As the Olds idles next to the mound, I tap cigar ash onto the dirt.

"Got a problem?" Blanks asks lazily, almost pulling a complete sentence out of his ass.

I take a last eternal drag off the cigar nub. "I was hoping you could tell me who painted those lovely cornstalks. I'd like to hire him to do my toilet seat." I deal the smoke onto the mound, its final resting spot. The Olds wrenches left, devouring the last yards of infield, leaves a

hole in third base, and to an extraordinary rendition of Bucky, Bucky, Bucky, flattens the last of the wooden stalks in right. We fill up at a Mobil so Wayne can buy some mouthwash. Then we pull into a smoky dive – on McDade Boulevard, a few miles from Hill’s campus. Colored lights polka-dot the dark. The colors swim, purple and pink. You’d be sick to the gills, if you stared too long.

I bum a buck off the Covalowski twins for the jukebox (learn a new sign, there) and rejoin the deaf congregants in the corona of light around the booze.

This taste like piss to you? Tisch signs to Al.

That’s...Old...Milwaukee, I sign. We all clink glasses. I bask in the merriment as much as possible. I try to make good eye contact with Tischler, but he looks away, not even a smile, but at least the daggers are gone from his stare. He looks back and says, “You learn that at the Texas School for the Deaf?”

I force a smile.

“Bagging groceries?” Wayne practically pleads.

Tisch asks, “The Cheese Stake?”

“And a few other places along the way.”

Tisch frowns, “I don’t get why he likes you so much.”

Later, Tisch, Al signs.

“I don’t think your uncle likes me at all, Tisch.”

Tischler nods with a look of not-total-surprise. “As much as I want to win, if you hurt him, I will take you apart.”

The bartender tops off our mugs, and the waitress rattles off an order.

We should really get the car back, Wayne signs.

“We’ll return the car when we’re done with it,” I say, suddenly unfazed by the mounting reams of conflict in my life. This beats all hell out of scraping dried chewing gum out of the carpets at the Golden Nugget (Reno).

“She here yet?” Wayne asks, pressing his pointy yellow bangs flat on his forehead.

I don’t have time to answer as Jenna enters the bar hesitantly.

Wayne doesn’t recognize her at first since she isn’t wearing what Al calls, “her birth control glasses.” Her green eyes glow sharply. Her unstyled hair is still shorter than it ought to be, but she’s actually done something with it this time – lather, rinse, repeat. And the point is: all dolled up, she looks female.

“I must be hammered,” Al says. Al signs to Tisch, *Okay, her posture still sucks. She has no tits. But I tell you what: that tennis skirt is working for me.*

Not this time, Al.

In a pinch, I mean.

Tischler stares menacingly.

In a cabin. In the woods. In a snowstorm. White-out. Power outage. And she’d have to shave that mustache.

Wayne meets Jenna halfway, touches her necklace, and signs, *Cool.* Tracking the music’s thunk-thunk-thunk, they pitch from side to side before the speakers. Her tennis skirt flutters in the pink and purple lights. I spy the peach schnapps behind the bar. I need a belt in major sort of way. But I want to be able to kiss Julie without getting the riot act. Outside her office when I’d stuck the note under her door, I froze stiff at her shadow behind the frosted glass, rustling papers at her desk. Since that moment I’ve felt a hollow thud under my ribs. Perhaps that was as close as I’ll ever get to her again. She’s either done with me or fact-checking me, or

both. Counting the corner exits, I feel Al pinch shoulder. At the room's entrance, Julie sucks the remnants of a Little Debbie off her thumb. Her cupcake smile cuts closer, and her advice from the first day in her office bolsters me: *The right thing is always coming at us. Make yourself open to receive it.*

I guess we'll see how open I can ask *her* to be?

Everybody says hello. Julie rinses her teeth with my last sip of beer. She hangs very close to my side, but I resist putting my arm around her. "Is that Dr. Goodnight's car in the lot?" she asks, pushing off my forearm to check out the room from her toes.

Black Crows play. This must be an omen.

I sign to Julie, *Need...talk. Know...why...we...need...win...championship?*

She's more bothered about Al and Tisch being old enough to drink and signs a question to them about that.

Determined to wait the administrator out, I foghorn, "Let's dance. I love this jam."

"Same here!" she says. *How could you know?* her fingers stammer.

The dance floor is rocking. I cleverly hold up a shiny quarter. *I...jukebox. Just...know...from...before.*

"I'm sorry," she signs and says. "It's been a hard couple of days." But more than stress, her face radiates pitiable confusion.

On the dance floor, I realize my selection of one of her all time favorite songs might be a flag to her of all the important things my meningitis might keep u from sharing. I embrace her tightly, and listen to her gnawing words on my shoulder, "I know what I'm doing."

Wayne banks off us, spinning Jenna and her pleats.

Julie lectures herself, "You have no idea what you're doing. This cannot work."

What I hear is both that she wants me to be deaf and to not be deaf. Releasing her, I squeeze her tired hands until they fill with blood again. The muscles in her face, neck, and shoulders relax as if we're back in the bedroom. The world is our bedroom! Her eyes are glassy and boundless, perhaps focused on the great future that lies ahead us? Yet behind those eyes and lively smile, she seems to be working out a difficult math problem, (2.5 children! I want to blurt), or deciding between two identical, yet opposite options on a personality quiz (I'm the guy! I'm about to shout). Her lips part for the answer and she sings:

"Hey pretty baby let my light your candle..."

I clamor: "'cause momma I'm sure hard to handle now, yes around!"

Julie's limp across the steering wheel of her Altima when I slide in the other side. She fans herself, then signs, *Wow, LaMar. You never cease to amaze. That was – remarkable in there.*

I...see...lips...and...remember...words.

"Oh! Right!" She tags her forehead. She tests me with a voiceless sentence and I get *Latin.*

The beer gurgles in my chest. *Never...took.*

She nods, more confused, "So why say you took it?"

"I wanted you to really like –" I dig my thumb into my chest.

"I did, Harold. But not for your...academic prowess," she says, dropping her end of the bittersweet truth in my lap. I sit up, ready to do the right thing (hell, look what I've done with the Oaks!), then a car backfires – or is it a car? My arms and legs are prickly, jabbed by cold spikes. My pants and shirt are suddenly sopping. With blood? I might just gag. I can't get

Willie out of my mind. And Al and Booeey and Luke and Jerry. And Tischler. Or am I really just thinking of my own neck?

"You did like me, Julie. But now?"

"Is Latin all you've made up?"

My buzz is wearing off. I feel ugly and decrepit. I ease out and shut the door tidily. The Altima fishtails onto the boulevard and over the crest of a hill before vanishing with the stars and moon, behind the chalky clouds. Through the exhaust Goodnight's Olds materializes. The cops probably on their way, so why not go inside and have another?



If Thunder had been there to see Pee Wee Cox's bat flick the ball into the jet stream, he would've held his breath as you turn to watch it soar over left field, lash back above the pursuing outfielders, across center, all the way to the corner in right, where the closest man stops at the wall, watches the spheroid carry helplessly out of reach, hover at the fence, and curve.

"Foul ball!"

Half the crowd whistles relief. The other thousand or so groan.

"You want to talk about constant sex?" you froth spastically to yourself, "You almost screwed your entire life!"

Hands tucked inside his tiger-orange belt, squirting chaw with every little step, Coach Rudden jogs to the mound. "What was that?"

You shrug and roll your eyes.

"Scudder is loose. He'll put 'em in the book and we'll go home."

Your shoulder joint feels like it was on fire and somebody tried to put the flames out with an ice pick. Gravity alone might pull you from the game...rather than pushing the #12 pendant's metallic sweetness to your lips. "I got this guy, Coach."

Coach Rudden licks his mustache golden red. "Just stay off the plate. Way off the plate."

You have trouble finding your father in the expanding tobacco cloud that seems to engulf the stands, you know if you can paint a fastball inside, a second legend will grace the Bucks's dinner table. The omens are pointing that way. There isn't a twitch of doubt in your shoulder or face that your whole life has been leading to this. The fans are up again. 50 stars and 13 stripes lie flat on the sky. The crow is still gliding in circles over the cornfield. You've got a love so deep for the game of baseball you feel no shoulder pain and wonder if someday you ought to write a song about it. After nodding at the Urdansky's sign, you rear back with a smile that blots out the man in the moon. You reach back for something extra and brings your weight toward home.

Pee Wee chokes the bat handle and lifts his massive calf, awaiting a lightning bolt.

A dainty balloon sails from your fingertips.

The arm that only a year ago the Cincinnati Reds were going to sign for half a mil drips from its socket. The bat fans your curls. Pee Wee spans the sky. He pulls down the yelping sun in his fist and waves at its soaring replacement, which amazingly blasts the circling crow into a shower of feathers that will still drizzle at dusk. Heart-stomping glee bolts the enemy's dugout. There's dancing and singing as your teammates weep and scowl. Justine crosses her legs and frowns at a scuff on her shoe. And though you would've gladly looked to the emptying stands to see Thunder cover his shame-red face, the turd of the cigar alone oozing out, you know you won't find it there.

From here on, you will have to settle for the constant cry over your shoulder, "I asked you to do one thing for me! One thing!"

Chapter 30

IN TEN SECONDS THUNDER AND LIGHTNING SLAY GIANTS

By "Sweet" Lou Ellison

Goodnight had underappreciated what a goddamn goldmine Google was for the dedicated researcher. Intent on his mission, he failed even to notice that the Olds wasn't where he'd left it when he waited at the window while his printer permanized the blessed email from The Texas School for the Deaf. Apparently the school did once have a Harold LaMar. But only one. And he graduated in 1979. Goodnight just about twisted his ankle tripping down the stairs but that didn't hobble his flight to the campus library and a more extensive search on Willie Chance. The articles poured forth about the glory years as well as the football star's sordid decline. There were stalled contract negotiations, bad investments, public intoxications with groupies, and finally handcuffs, as Willie was led away on racketeering charges. Working through dinner, Goodnight eventually got tired and grouchy because he'd found nothing in Willie's past life that would connect him to Harold LaMar or the Texas School for the Deaf. Still, he did learn some things. For instance, before Willie Chance languished three years at Hill, before he went to Graterford eight years ago, even before the scandal, when things were swinging his way, Willie seemed to be overshadowed by his cohort, "the dashing and smashing" Thunder Bucks. Perhaps it was guilt, perhaps it was his growling stomach, but for a moment Goodnight felt a somber kinship with Willie and wrote his name, **CHANCE**, in bigger letters above a headline with the name, Bucks.

Then Goodnight could've smacked himself. It was there all the time. Chance and Bucks. He dropped the 's' and added 'y', and the rest was **BUCKY**.

This time Goodnight began his research at the end of Thunder Bucks's career. A picture showed the player lying in a country field by a fence. A hunting accident, it said.

THUNDER SILENT! CHANCE NOT TALKING...

"Another round of sleaze, if you please, Mr. Ellison." Goodnight leaned giddily at the monitor. While the article printed, he borrowed a magnifying glass from the librarian. He magnified a picture of the Bucks family at a United Way picnic. Thunder stood with a little boy and girl and a woman so beautiful, even Goodnight couldn't remember having one as rare as she. The boy, Kenesaw, had light curly hair and bore a fantastic resemblance to the phenom shortstop from – was it Panhandle State?

Could I be fooling myself, Goodnight wondered. *These are the results I want to find.*

Raising the glass, he fell in love with himself all over again. There was no mistaking the #12 pendant lassoing the boy's neck. So why would a normal kid, with a leg up on the rest of the world, who had looks and brains and the rest of it, risk all that for the Oaks and Willie? Was there a missing page to this equation? The professor twisted his neck hair into a greasy knot and ran one more search. This time Lou Ellison was the subject.

Sweet Lou Ellison had been sports editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* at the time of Thunder Bucks' death. He had made allegations of the quarterback's involvement in Willie Chance's game-rigging adventures. He also insinuated that Thunder might've taken his own life in the rural stubblefield. Nothing and no one could corroborate. And with the Eagles's owner publicly denouncing him as a liar and a man misled by avarice for a good story, the newspaper soured on Sweet Lou. He was fired and blackballed.

Like complementary base pairs on a double-helix, everything was beginning to line up for Goodnight. "Elaine, wait'll you see this," he said, punching the print button on the computer. "Unless," he bit off his pencil eraser, ground it up, and spat the shrapnel on the wall, "you have known all along."

A case for foul play would only interest those who wanted to know. The deaf were underdogs and identified with underdogs. The situation required finesse. Better to direct, the professor made up his mind, than to play.

Three years ago the *Philadelphia Inquirer* dismissed its sports editor. If Goodnight could scrape him up, he could accomplish his goals by proxy, without having to play the part of Dr. Doom.

"Where are you now, Lou?" Goodnight reverently asked the stack of articles, as he threw on his cardigan and burst into the moist evening air without so much as a wave to the librarian. "Where are you now?"

The cool, puffy sky had the distorted uniformity of newsprint under a magnifying glass. Thin smears of clouds bent at both ends of the grim horizon and were layered on by opaque, white strips. The haze of a full moon led Goodnight to his car, right where he'd left it, but there was something unmistakable about it – a peculiar aroma that was not his own, one that hadn't tickled his snout in a while: for the first time since it was driven off the lot the day of his own college graduation, the Olds smelled like victory.

Chapter 31

The sauce had worn off and so had the self-importance and the sanctimony. I feel worse than I can ever remember feeling. As for the rest of the squad, everything that can possibly go wrong does. There's been a dragonfly convention in the infield. A freak high-pressure system compliments of Lake Superior had driven their mating headquarters from a swamp in Valley Forge to the damp Middleburg woods. In the sixth inning when the Oaks finally got something

going, play was halted because two dragonflies met in the McKinley Tech catcher's ear canal and set up housekeeping. The catcher was helped off the field and into an ambulance, but not before Willie provided him a Hill College brochure to read on the way to the emergency room and told him that if things didn't work out in surgery, the Oaks would love to have him next year. Lots of Federal money available.

The game resumed with the bags crammed. Afforded ample time to count the 99 ways he could fuck this up, Wayne might've been better off swinging a pussy willow. He tapped into an inning-ending double play for the second of 3-times on the day. In the top of the next, Tisch and I collided on a routine pop fly – it was a tough sky Jenna said and Willie agreed – scoring two more. The Red Jackets took the lead, 5-4. This is a meaningless game for the Red Jackets except that every squad from Jefferson County to Johannesburg is gunning for the deafies, and the Red Jackets were no slouches to begin with. Although Al has gotten his stick back, has been keeping the ball low, and sweating out the poison inning by inning, by the ninth his arm is spaghetti.

Willie turns to Jenna, *Think he's tired?*

We're out of arms, Willie.

Luke, the king of all batting practice pitchers, blows a bubble and signs, *I'm warm.*

I know you are, Willie signs. Go warm the bench.

Jenna tells Willie to leave Al in. And she looks like a wiz, when the Tech batter rings one off Al's hip that hiccups to me at short. Willie nods at her, but they both know the Oaks have dodged the last one in the chamber. We're one measly run shy of sending the game into extras and two scores from capturing the division, and full speed ahead to history. With the game flying by, Goodnight must still be trapped in lab. Julie Ross isn't on the premises either. Elaine is as cold and transparent as an ice sculpture. As for the Oaks returning to the bench for perhaps their last ever licks, Willie has never seen them so low. He practically smooches each of their sunken, hollow mugs.

"Good inning, Wayne..."

"...Good inning, Al..."

"...Good inning, Tisch..."

"...inning, Zernial..."

"...inning, Doyle..."

"...inning Snooter..."

"...ning Lopez..."

"...ng Hunt..."

"Hey asshole?" he says to me. "You're an ASS-hole, ass-HOLE!" But he gathered them up, stood his tiny frame on the bench, and signed down to them, *Wake up, girls and woman! We have come a long way. We have fought the good fight. But it's not over. We have earned the right to represent this division in the league championship. So get up there and send that candy-ass curveball into the next zip code.*

Spirits spike. The team bunches together and growles something loud and unintelligible. At least that's what I hear, lounging under the edge of the bench, only my legs sticking out, so nobody can see my tongue spitting cotton (or count the potato chips and spare change stuck to my back and shoulders).

I can't believe myself. What total dipshit needs movie star-glomming smackheads, who haven't had a hit in 20 years, backing him in order to tell a person he loves them? It would've been great if it had ended there. But Julie had fed me a choice opening on a silver platter, fat and

sweet, and all I had to do was take a cut. In her unassuming, everyone's-innocent-till-proven-guilty way, she had asked me to be straight with her. The only thing she'd ever asked from me, I made her beg for. In the beginning, it would've been too easy (wouldn't it?) to have given the letter to Willie, gotten the scoop on Thunder, and moved along. I would've never hurt the person I now care most about.

There has to be a way to make this work.

The first two Hill batters, Scheinblum and Doyle, open the bottom of the last with smashes into the gloves of the right and center fielders. With two away and Tischler at the plate, only one out from a marvelously heroic second-place finish, I don't realize I'm on deck until Willie claws his fingernails into the scar on my cheek, lifts me to my feet, and turkey-walks me to the bat rack.

"Game time, Shorty."

"The team knows I can hear."

"They know you can play baseball, too."

"Too?"

"They've known you ain't deaf all along."

Tischler has worked the count to 2-2, fouling off anything close he doesn't like. He seems in control, though someone should let his gyrating knees in on that.

"You told them I can hear?" I say to Willie.

"I ain't told jackshit. You're a horrible actor!" Spittle flies.

I spittle-spray back, "Do you have fucking pills, Willie? Can you chill the fuck out? You're making me a wee bit nervous."

"Oh, my bad. When you woke up a few minutes ago was the maid service a wee bit not to your liking? The free room and board upset you? Maybe I can talk to the concierge about getting your bill reduced." Willie unloads a torrent of jailhouse garbage about hitting the ball to the moon or he'll ring some guy called Nunu, who can line up the kind of hombre that would be psyched to "mess up your shit" for less than what I might make in a night flipping burgers.

"Thanks for the pep talk," I say.

The pitch sails over the catcher into the backstop and makes the count full to Tischler. A strike kills the Oaks. A ball; we'll live.

I thumb at the action. "Go 'head yell, Willie. Sign your fuckin' balls off. None of this matters if Science Boy doesn't get on."

"He ain't gonna let me down."

"Yeah?"

"He is a Chance."

Tisch closes his eyes and draws the base on balls.

"Now, you're either the winning run, or that dead motherfucker we used to know."

"Willie, I have to tell you something."

"Can it wait?"

"No, it cannot. Julie knows."

"Don't even say that to me."

"Julie Ross, the Assistant Dean of Students, knows."

"Who said what?"

"Who said nothin'."

"Then what's she know?"

"That you're a raging sleazebag."

“How’d she find out?”

“You’re a horrible actor.” I cackle all the way to the plate.

“Hit a homerun or you are...off this team!”

“Nuts!” I taunt brattily.

Tisch takes a conservative lead at first.

The Red Jacket pitcher, Thompson, has been throwing bullets since coming on in relief in the eighth. The infielders are chattering Thompy, Big Ace – a wispy 6 foot 5 he is – and Key-id. They tell me to put me in the book and hum-shoot-fire. Tisch had fouled off so many pitches that Thompy is rubbing his elbow after every delivery. Got a phantom case of tendonitis, which has less to do with the tendons in his elbow than with the jeers that he knows will follow him from the field to the showers and back onto the grounds of every team he faces next season. True, Hill’s had a spectacular year. But being the guy who lets them in is not a great strategy for making friends or getting laid. I can see he plans to use everything to get me. But he shocked even himself, the way the first one blazes in at the letters. Though the call could go either way, the umpire calls a strike.

Taking a practice cut with the new stick, I feel an inkling of the connection I had with the bat I’d busted in two. I am having trouble getting Julie out of his mind until I hear the umpire say to the catcher, “Poor suckers. Doormats forever. Now this fluke season. Between us chickens and the barn door, it’s best for the league if the ride stops here.”

“Why?” the catcher asks the ump as I step back in the batter’s box.

“It’s a liability playing Hill – what if one of ’em ran through a fence or got ran over by a base runner? Broken bones or worse ’cause he’s picking his nuts, and he don’t hear no footsteps.”

The next pitch is smeared black with dragonfly wings and barely skims my shoestrings. The umpire calls another strike.

“Where was that?” I turn viciously.

The ump removes his mask. “Bor-der-line!”

“Yeah, borderline between low and really low!” I kick a pile of dirt on home plate.

The ump screams, “Wanna get ejected?”

“For what?”

“Covering the plate with dirt!”

“You can’t see it anyway!”

“Coach,” the ump warns Willie, “one more word and he’s done.”

Wayne rushes up and leads me by the shoulder to the bat rack. While I cool off and wipe by sweaty sideburns on my shoulder sleeves, Wayne shows me his aluminum.

I glare.

Wayne nods.

I shake my head.

Wayne thrusts the bat forward.

“I can’t swing that thing, Wayne! It’ll take a day and a half to get from my shoulder to the front of the plate!”

Wayne pulls me close, like I’m his bitch. “I know yuh caaah. Becky!”

“Becky!” I spit at the scoreboard until the urge to bust the moose in the jaw passes. The moose’s zombiac look does not deviate.

“Oh for Christ,” I say, “give it to me.” A steel beam might be exactly the thing. I swing once, and it nearly pulls me to the ground. “Fucking Excalibur.” I check the audience. Elaine is

leaning over the heads in front. Willie nibbles his confirmation cross. Wayne is beating his chest. Every other Oak, including Al, can't bear to watch.

Little explosions of thunder are pinballing across the county. The silo is dull. Low to the treetops, the sky is moist and gray as freshly-poured concrete – was that Indianapolis (no, Ashland, Kentucky.) I groan beneath the bat's weight. A lament like an orchestra tuning its instruments begins with Wayne and spreads down the Oak bench. Thompson sits back in his delivery. The poignant drone builds to a scratchy pitch that jerks the ball out of the hurler's hand. The ball bounced to the plate. I step at it. If the bat weren't a ton on my shoulder – like the relic of the true cross burning in my tush is not enough – I might've swung. Tisch easily takes second. I look entreatingly at the ump to make sure a bouncer is still considered south of the border. It is. As the din rises again, Thompson drops his glove, yanks his shirttails out of his pants, and with both hands dries his face. When his coach comes out to steady him, Thompson says, "I'd piss myself except my bladder's sweated out."

"Slow...Thompy. Deaf children."

Thompy sheds a nervous smile.

My attention wandered beyond the wavering fence slats in left field to the dorm, back to the tilted scoreboard next to the barn that still has the Oaks one under and one out from elimination. I bought on to help the Oaks take the prize, but all day I've accomplished nothing short of the opposite. Three times the bases have been loaded for me and three times I've swung at and missed ball four. The game would be done with if I'd just watched. Wayne's bat is helpless in my hands. I see myself slouching back to the flop room above B A, where flops belong, another titanic loss under my belt, easing into a life filled with schnapps and big pants. So this is Middleburg? So this is Division III baseball? And with me at the plate, Division III baseball at its worst. The gold chain's links swarm my neck. I yank it off and let it run through my fingers into my back pocket, lustrous #12 and all. I hoist the mallet into the air, stagger a half-step, and steady myself under its weight, prepared to ring the bell on myself. The trees moan *loser-phony-loser-phony*, and it's tough not believing the words as I try to find Charlie Potatoes's ugly mug in the flashing leaves.

Why couldn't my parents have given me the baby Jesus and a little less of, "I'm packing the kids and moving to a one-bedroom in Manhattan"? Maybe then I would've cultivated a faith in something larger, instead of squirming on the end of the stick of my own hubris.

Thompson takes the sign and feels the ball in his glove.

I wiggle my slendering hips. A slow steady zing migrates from my right butt cheek – the achy one. When the tremor rises, the silver pipe lightens in my grip. I poke the sky and stir. A drop of sweat in the shape of an hourglass hangs from my chin. The air is thick enough to eat. I almost giggle at Thompson's ain't-got-nothin' sneer. And although a knuckler does jitter left and right, when it cuts back to the middle, I raise my front leg and open my hips.

From the next town over, the silo picks up a crackle of lightning and beams it to home plate. Wayne's bat cuts like the paddle of a lifeboat, j-stroking from low to high, and in one enlightening explosion, sparks seemed to stream from the words Hillerich & Bradsby and the ball spouts like cannon blast, waves at the infielders, then the lazy branches, and the dormitory, before disappearing through a hole in the sky. The fans stomp the bleachers and Willie chips a tooth on his cross.

"Don't look now, but I think we just violated Cuba's air space!" Al opens his eyes in time to falsetto.

Thompy is already in the back of the Red Jacket bus as I kick second. Rounding third, I take up a fruitless search for Julie's let-down look in the record turnout of thirty-one. I turn my sights to home where a receiving line is waiting for me, an ovation led by an afro only slightly less funky than his coach's.

Tischler gathers me in a vertebrae-popping squeeze. Crushed in close, the team bowles us over and makes a pile on home plate. Wayne is the last to land on and when he does, the lumber rotting in my ass blasts out like a warhead and leaves a scar to match the one on my face. My sigh flattens an ant pile in the batter's box.

Championship-bound, the Hill College Oaks roll in the dust.

Willie gives me a brotherly hand-up. "That ball's still going." He waves his hat at the trees. "Shades of yesteryear, my man." He has a tear in his eye.

"Yeah, so Assistant Dean Ross," I say, clearing the dust from my throat.

Willie blows his nose on his sleeve, eyes watery. "If she knows anything, she'll be the last one to peep."

"Why?"

"She ain't want to look like a total incompetent." Willie totes the equipment to the barn. I scoot after, tongue too dusty and numb to speak.

Willie smiles as he heaves the equipment inside and padlocks the barn door. "Can't give her all the credit. You do something about that asshole-looking-thing on your face, and Hollywood's callin', my man."

"What about all that 'bad actor' shit?"

"Getting' you pumped. You conned the daylights outta that bitch. If she ever wakes up, she won't have to wait long for this to go away. You was right all along, Bucks. This might just work."

At last, Willie depends on me more than ever. I swallow the ice off my tongue. "What do you think I'm doing here, Willie?"

"Helping us win games?" he joshes gamely since this is not the time to get sentimental. A ghost hand tugs me back, but I stand firmly with a vein beating down my forehead.

Willie leads us – past the losers running sprints in the parking lot and the Oaks hitting the showers to one door past the locker room – with the vanishing hope that he can tempt me into leaving the big talk until later.

Willie's office has room for a metal desk, two chairs, and a radiator that only works in the summer. We sit with our knees almost touching.

We nod back and forth a dozen times until Willie says, "Are we done yet?"

"Dad and I used to go to the cabin. Just him and me. I was never a big hunter and he saw that. He liked hunting bird and he liked the company."

"He coulda done five years with nothin' but a loaf of Wonder Bread. But he couldn't last five minutes without an audience," Willie says, making eye contact.

"This time he wanted away from the crowd. It was April 25th."

"The day I got out."

"I thought he'd want to see you, but we never talked about it. I was juggling finals, friends coming home, and the next day – as a freshman – I'd be on the mound in the NCAA Regionals, last stop before the College World Series. I felt like I should be ten other places, but I couldn't say no to him. After we put the dogs up and turned in, we had a talk."

Willie's chair stops squeaking. He cautiously squirts his lungs.

"'bout what?"

I shiver and go on. “He asked me what I wanted to be. What was important to me. Did I want a family of my own.”

“Cool.”

“After Dad started snoring, I couldn’t stop looking at my watch. My girlfriend had left a number of messages on my cell. She was coming up from Duke to see my game and wanted to see me that night. Every minute without her killed. Dad was going to follow me to the stadium in the morning. But I got the idea to write him a note, saying I really wanted to wake up in my bed at school; he’d understand that. But every mile from the cabin, I couldn’t get that conversation out of my head. Then he—” my voice rises, “you know the rest—”

“—so careless!”

My words rush out. “Textbook careful is more like it. Not like the football field. He never took risks with a gun. If he’d been through that fence once, he’d been through it a million times. He always locked the safety, then put the gun over the fence before him.”

“Some kind of hurry then.”

“To catch a deer with dogs.”

“I don’t remember hearing anything about dogs. Nobody takes dogs if they’re plannin’ to bag a deer.”

“Right! He went up there to hunt dove.”

Willie leans back and checks out *his* office all the way around and seems to wonder why he’s never decorated it as though he were planning on staying, no personal effects to speak of.

“What are you gettin’ at, Bucks?”

“You ever hunt with my dad?”

“Never saw him miss.”

“He was hunting bird.”

“I heard you the first time.”

“A sharpshooter hunting bird with buckshot?”

Willie can’t help himself. “Maybe he was cheating. People been known to. Makes for an easier mark.”

“Did he need one?”

Willie’s ears are turning orange under his afrom. He massages his eyelids and sighs, “No.”

“So why did you miss the funeral, Willie?”

Willie speaks loudly at the ceiling. “I knew that reporter, Ellison, would be poking around for a story that didn’t exist.” He looks indulgently at me. “I don’t blame you for wanting to tie this in a nice little bow, but that ain’t life.”

“I skipped the funeral because of a story that did exist.”

Willie folds his hands in his lap and frowns at them.

“Know what I think, Willie?”

“No. But I got a feeling you’re gonna tell me.”

I wait for him to look up. “I left for my game. You showed up at the cabin on my heels. We missed each other by an hour or two, max. I think that reporter was right. You went there to ask my dad if he dropped the dime on you.”

“You’re confused.”

“I’m confused?”

“Wait! Lemme guess: you threw a perfect game, shortest game in history, and beat all the cops and media back to your father’s cabin, right? You saw some tracks – musta been

Willie's. God rest your father's soul, son. But you come in my office talkin' shit like that, you'd kinda have to know what you're talking about."

"Or have shit like this." I feel around in my equipment bag.

Sinking into his chair, self-satisfied, Willie sports a greedy look, like he smells the stacks of money and can feel them fanning both his ears, murmuring *fuck the Oaks*, while he imagines me dig every last wad out of the bag's nooks – only to find an assortment of bones underneath. Willie sits up straight like a pole just shot up his ass. I pushed aside the movie projector, pop open the film can, and hand Willie a piece of paper. Willie unfolds the paper hungrily like he's hoping for the information to a safe-deposit box or a bus station locker. He takes a deep breath and reads aloud:

Son,

You're the only one I can trust to do this. Willie and I threw a couple games together. He made all the arrangements. I was the silent partner. I'd made so many bad investments, lost millions on that restaurant chain, and I was going to retire at the end of the season. I couldn't wipe my ass without chugging a bottle of painkillers.

Willie smiles.

The first two were easy. So easy I went for one more. I didn't tell him. I placed it through my attorney, who knew a real bookmaker, a mobster, who lives on a lake. Fifty thousand dollars. Your mom used to put up a brave front, but we were paycheck to paycheck at the time. The people who care about reporting such things knew that. We were at Soldier Field, favored by six over the Bears. We had to win because we were in contention for the wild card and that would mean playoff cash, and I had been banking all year on that, too. When we had possession, I could control the flow of the game. But I made a mistake. I wanted it to look so legit that with us ahead by one during what was amounting to our last possession, I was going to drive us down for three. A touchdown for us sews up the wild card but loses my bet. Nothing for us, and they get the ball back and kick a field goal, and the wild card money's gone. If we get a field goal, I feel pretty good we win the game, lose to the spread, and I pick up both ends. We were second and ten on the Bears' twenty-five. Somehow my dump pass to Prudente, right in front of the linebacker, bounced off about eight people, before Willie plucked it out of the air and went untouched into the end zone. Everyone on our side was excited except me. The game was won, but now we were covering! For the next fifty-seven seconds, there was no bigger Bears fan on God's green earth than me. I prayed to Jesus, Moses, Satan. Whoever would listen. We were leveraged, son. So what was I going to do? Where was I going to come up with fifty thousand dollars? I didn't want to work off the debt by letting some bookmaker run my life or my football team. Maybe I should have. But that was not what I had worked my whole life for. Word was already getting around that Willie was seen on the town with a colorful crowd. At least, that's what that reporter at *The Inquirer* knew, and I couldn't fight him off. I figured it was only a matter of time before he found out everything. Willie and I had an arrangement for the two games we'd done: if one of us got caught, he worked alone. Period. I knew he would hold up his end of the deal. That's the kind of guy Willie is. He probably thought I'd be the last one to panic. But I did. I had my attorney pal anonymously sell the information to Lou Ellison, who paid with a personal check. I think it was the guy's life savings. But he got sports editor. The mob got their money. And I got to be Thunder Bucks for five more years.

Dad

“So much for the hidden loot fantasy, Willie mumbles, forgetting I can hear him. He spaces out, taking back to a different time and place, mumbling a mile a minute. “Letter’s better than a bag of dough. Things...inclined to believe are true. Needed to know Thunder betrayed me...wouldn’t betray me...why not say so to my face when I asked...just keep lying to the rest of the world...but leave a confession with the kid? Letter sounds like Thunder...writing is like Thunder...’only one I can trust with this’ crap...when I’m only one who’d never broken his word? Even says so, right there in the end... come close to giving my side on Larry King, or a book that’d open a new investigation into Thunder’s death...yeah, if I want to look like the crazy, bitter old man trying to profit off a corpse...police report and scene did sound too exact...not the only person who suspected Gwen or the cops cleaned things up before calling the press...but thinking back...Gwen hated that cabin...Thunder said they weren’t talking at the time...bouncing between the cabin and the flop room...for small town cops, the going price for the scoop on Thunder Bucks’s death...way too rich to pass up...somebody got there first!”

“Boy, you just like him. Got that hoaxster gene. Getting people to believe in things they got no right to. But you ain’t getting me to believe that letter is real.”

“Why? Because it doesn’t say, ‘Tell Willie I’m sorry. And I love him’?”

The room is a sauna

“That letter’s got everything, including mobsters on Lake Perry Como.” I hawk him. “So maybe you got one thing right in your letter there. He did that Bears game – *with* me. To *cover* the spread. Biggest win of my career. Wild.”

“So it is true.”

Willie comes so close I can taste lunch in his breath. “Partly, kid. You see, I was the one short on cash. It was *my* idea. Your father mighta been a train wreck with money, but there was always people ready to jump on with more.”

“He did this to help you?”

“Nothing was ever enough for him. He did it for a thrill. The details—” Willie slaps his heart. “In here – *mine*.”

I zip my bag and stand. “P.S. So is your baseball team. Good luck in the championship.”

“No, wait – wait.” Willie touches my arm. “Why you gonna make me talk about things I ain’t even told my old lady?”

“Who put you away?”

“A reporter.”

I swallow a hard lump that goes down like a T-bone. I say in a softly audible undertone that comes out like a whisper traveling down an empty stone corridor, “One day when I was about 14 or 15, Nikki accidentally broke this pen that was made of hard black plastic, one of those fancy pens that slides into a holder on a small piece of green marble – a keepsake – the only thing my father’s father had ever given to him. Nobody knew this until Nikki broke the thing. Dad lost it, just screamed and yelled terrible things. I could see how alone he felt, and I just didn’t understand it. I did the only thing I could think of. I hugged him and said, ‘Dad. We all love you. That’s what matters.’”

“What’d he do?”

“Didn’t seem to matter to him.”

Willie sighs at the chair, and I sit.

“It is impossible to sleep in jail. Every night in my bunk for 5 years, I ran things over and over, back and forth, and side to side. The bookie had airtight cover. Big money, big friends. Only three other people knew. Me, your dad, and my sister.”

“Tischler’s mother knew?”

“She placed the bets under an alias. When *The Inquirer* broke the story on an anonymous tip, I took all the heat. Five years, Kenesaw. Your dad didn’t visit me once. So the day after I got out, I visited him. I knew where. Crack of dawn at the cabin.”

I hold my breath.

“He knew I was comin’. He was hardly surprised to see me. I was surprised that it was so good seeing him. He said there was stuff workin’, it wasn’t finalized yet, but he was gonna set me up. Right? The Eagles pushed me to get a degree in jail, you know, hinting about a front office or scouting position, when I got out. Your father could’ve been behind that. But that’s not what I went to see him for. I didn’t go for money this time. I wanted to hear from him what happened, Kenesaw. Just the way you read it.”

I cover my eyes. I can’t stop Willie from seeing me cry, but I can’t keep from seeing Willie see me.

“Later they said he got shot. I thought, ‘That’s it. We’ll never know.’ It wasn’t until me and Arminta saw the news, I started thinking, shit, I shoulda taken him up on his offer.”

The coach looks down and up at me. “Three years later, who do I run into at my local carnival, working at Cheese Stake, staying in the old party room? Three years, I waited for you. I knew you’d come when you were ready. So here you go. I’m only going to say this once. No one but your father coulda tipped the paper. Even if my sister wanted to, she didn’t know enough. And that’s what Sweet Lou Ellison staked his career on.”

Big swells form another clot in my throat. After a few soundless croaks, I say, “What can I do to make it up to you, Willie?”

He slaps my shoulder. “Got one more team to beat.”

“Willie?”

“Yeah?”

“If I’d stayed with him, you’d be workin’ for the Eagles, and he’d still be here.”

“Son, I’ve watched you do things that most people don’t dream of. But if Thunder Bucks couldn’t stop that gun from going off, you couldn’t either.” Shrugging back onto the high road, Willie quotes the exhaustive police and media investigations: Thunder went over the fence with the barrels of the gun in his left fist and set the butt down too hard. A single shell discharged. There was no powder residue on his bare hand, or anything else that might suggest his hand was near the trigger.

“What about you guys together, Willie? You two could do anything.”

Frowning at his Docksidiers, Willie pushes his toe through the beaten leather. “All I know is I did my end. *If – if* he didn’t do his, I can’t tell you why. All I’ve come up with is, bein’ God ain’t as easy as it sounds.”

“I’m sure it’s no joy ride being his nephew.”

Willie puts the Tischler reference aside and waxes nostalgic. “You know how he got the nickname ‘Thunder’?”

“From that Springsteen song.”

“Naw. From breaking wind in the huddle.”

“Then how’d you get the name ‘Lightning?’”

“Running away from him! I’d get my assignment and book.”

“No way.”

“Let me tell you something else you might not know, Kenesaw: I’ve forgiven your father.”

“How?”

“He gave me you.”

I hear the crowd roar, the silence of invisibility, and the echo of the future all at once – no, just a prolonged rapping on the door.

Willie holds the handle. His voice is warm. “Kenesaw, you did the *one thing* your father wanted you to do. *Needed* you to do. Only you could do it. Now you can do the next thing he’d want: start living your own life. People’s always gonna believe what they wanna believe.”

Willie pulls the door open and sits back down.

It’s Al.

Willie signed, *Pagano, I swear. You could screw up a wet dream.*

Al ignores him and says, “Party up the hill, Roomie. Can’t start without you.”

Though I struggle to smile, it’s probably obvious that both Willie and I are shaking – in our own way shaking hands.

Al quietly leaves, but the snake tattoos on his arms seem to register his distress as the pitcher takes up smoking again.

Chapter 32

Atop the bleacher section at Oak Field, I peel green chips off the wood seats and feel the air finally clear and the hard stuff at my tail. I’m still breathing. While Willie had spent 5 years’ confinement trying to piece together his undoing, I’d spent the last 3 doing my own solitary calculus to understand why my father died. And now that I’ve gotten it straight with Willie, I’m free to hate and miss Dad in a way that can only be described as infinite. Nothing is better or worse. Things just are. I can make my own choices, just as Dad had. Of course, I’ve been making choices all along, and trying to act like someone else was making them for me.

I dial the Willie’s cell. I listen to Mom’s “hello” and silent expectation. I can see her standing by the oven in an apron, pushing a greased cookie sheet onto a rack and pulling out a new load.

“Hey,” I say.

She blubbers and Nikki comes on the line to make it a duet.

“Hey Bucks,” Nikki snuffles.

“How’s my favorite brat?”

“Taller than you.”

“Anytime you’re ready to get your ass kicked in hoops, you can –”

“Where are you?” Mom butts in.

“I share two hundred square feet with a very noisy guy,” I equivocate, and can’t hold the news any longer. “Guess who’s in the championship?”

“Awesome!” Nikki exclaims. “Where?”

For the first time in three years, I tell Mom and Sis where I’m hiding: Hill College for the Deaf. Dead airspace. I’m sure they’re thinking: we’re related to this guy?

“I’ll explain later.” Then there’s mostly subject-changing chitchat, a blow-by-blow on a veggie tart that someone had for lunch and the hairdresser screwing up somebody’s highlights. The signal dies before I can tell them I’ve found something special I’m not going to squander.

Julie usually works late, so I head to the office first.

I have no idea what to say to her. I suppose I can begin a successful squirm by saying she matters as much to me as baseball, and I’m having a hard time reconciling the two. Have I ever felt this strongly about a female – even Justine? Then I’d have to plunge into what I’m doing at Hill in the first place, and if the long shot comes through, I’ll be the one begging her to take another run at it with me, now or ever. I hear a sudden chorus in the tunnel under the tracks. My father is alternately bragging on and ragging him. Mom and Nikki are discussing the new men in their lives. Willie’s claiming I’m qualified to figure out the world on my own. And Julie is saying I’m an orange peel. Every region of my head pounds. I wish could menstruate and get it out in one hot gush, but it would just build and climax the next month and the one after that and so on. I come out the other end of the tunnel without bloodshed and pick up the moon-scattered path into the woods, until one clear voice boos above the rest. “Booooo,” carries from the trees.

I spin 360, half-expecting Dad’s ghost. A fungusy shaft of moonlight leads me to a floating silver grease spot. I pad into a copse and find Professor Robert Goodnight on an enormous pine stump, chin resting on his knees. The terminal mat of sleep dust on his eyelashes flutters iridescent as he chuckles, “Boo-boo!”

I knot up. My next move is more important than my homerun. It’s all I can do to get my fingers to sign, *Hello...professor*.

He slides over and invites me to sit. There’s something likeable about the coot, though in the lull, I have a premonition that slitting his throat and dumping him in the Schuylkill is the way to go.

“Yours is not the kind of public service most people are doing these days.”

Did Julie spill the beans? After all, since opening my trap and giving her that hack advice, she loved to get everything out in the open. Only with this, I know if she had, she would’ve gone to President Miller, not to Goodnight, who continues, “So now we have a situation. If this ruse sees the light of day, our good friend, Willie Chance, will be trading pinstripes for prison grays.”

I...don’t...understand, I sign.

“Mr. Bucks, the tuition and room and board for *deaf* scholarship students comes from Uncle Sam. And that makes stealing federal funds a kind of felony.”

What?

“You didn’t know that? Or did you not know we have laws in this country?”

I sit next to him.

“But let’s talk about what’s really important here. It is miraculous to me, what you have done. *Mind-blowing*. Creating hope where there was nought but despair.” Goodnight expels a rotten breath. The moon is running off his hair. He doesn’t look so great in this light. “And that’s exactly why you are going to play tomorrow.”

This is kind of like a press conference and now I'm kind of enjoying it. Goodnight isn't so awful. He isn't the enemy. He's a fan! Willie, I think, *paranoid freak*. My fingers are worms and amazingly articulate, signing, *Thank...you* and *Goodnight...Goodnight*, but the professor squeezes my fingers shut.

"I'm a scientist, Mr. Bucks."

I don't even flinch at the name.

"So I believe anything is possible when left to chance. Pardon the pun. Your teammates have self-assurance and are full of gumption—"

I clip a daisy with my thumbnail and pluck each petal – hero, hoaxster, hero, hoaxster, hero?

"—which creates a possibility, however infinitesimal, of their winning without you. That's why you have to be there to make sure the Oaks lose. It's the only guarantee."

I get to the last petal – hoaxster skunk – and laugh sarcastically. "Are you trying to have a sense of humor?"

"Wait. You haven't heard the punch line. If Hill wins, a certain sportswriter and I will make sure the sun never sets on you and Willie and this scandal. But if you make sure Hill loses, you and the whole grubby incident will fade away like a curveball sinking into dirt."

A cockroach skitters across my sneaker and I want to say, *Take me with you*.

"So, let's boil this down. Shall we? Sell out your teammates. Or sell Willie upriver. A mean choice, Mr. Bucks. But then life is filled with them, as I'm sure you already know."

A train slows into the depot, its bright windows project through the trees like blank frames of film.

"See, after you're gone, I'm gone, Willie, Elaine, Ms. Ross – after everybody's gone, there will still be deaf kids in need of a state-of-the-art science lab."

I look for the light up the hill – a slice of white American cheese – is my and Al's dorm window. I'm starving. A cheese steak might never taste so good.

"I can't," I finally say.

Goodnight pats me briskly on the arm. "Of course you can. This is it! The elusive opportunity that destiny denied you: a chance to be just like dear old dad." The professor has two small brown paper bags in his hands. He drops one at my feet.

"What's in it?"

Goodnight laughs. "See that's the thing with people who grow up in the suburbs. They have no sense of history." He makes his own path through the trees whistling "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," going with the other bag in the direction of Tischler's dorm.

I tear at my bag, and what forms in my hands is a paperback, The Criminal Provisions of the United States Code. At my locker, I put the book in my equipment bag with the rest of my crap. I hang my head and drink up the aromas of glove oil, yeasty socks, and a Ben Gay tube leaking root beer-smelling unguent, as if this were the last chance for gas before entering the desert. Misting up, I beat the tin cage with my elbows and fists. There's never an easy way. There are alternatives that absolutely stink.

Willie's so bent on winning, he might brush off Goodnight the way he had my chewing tobacco warning; when reality comes to roost, he'd pin his going back to the pen on my squawk to Julie, and history would repeat – except a Bucks would go with him this time. Not that hard time could be any worse than the hard mattress in the flop room.

Or, I can take a dive to save Willie.

Equipment bag underfoot, I hang behind a post on the platform for the next train and trade Dad's football card to the conductor. I bump from row to row, muttering, "Excuse me, miss" and "Sorry, sir." Before I can get to the rear of the last car and jump, I trip over a lady's pump into a seat and sit squarely on both butt cheeks without a whimper, for the first time in weeks.

The lamps in the old car flicker like heat lightning across a clear summer night, and I shudder at the freedom the rocky rails impart.

Part III

New Jersey

Chapter 33

Three years to the day that Willie Chance walked out of the maximum security prison in Graterford, Pennsylvania, he strode the Hill baseball field parking lot under a white sun. He stretched his cap into the donut of his afro and raved, "That two-faced hypocrite motherfucker! That backstabbing turncoat prick! I'll go to that cabin myself and drag his sorry ass back down here!"

From inside the bus, the team saw Willie cuss the barn and teetering silo.

This is probably something you don't know about me, Wayne signed to Jenna. When I was nine, I won a bass fishing tournament.

So this must be pretty anti-climactic for you then.

I have to tell you something, Al signed to Wayne. This is the honest to God's truth. You're not an athlete.

Can we start thinking about Alice Deal, please? Tisch signed.

You mean 'Daddy'?

Al's right, Tisch, signed Wayne. We should be overjoyed. We're better than any Hill team before us.

Rolling over dead with all four feet in the air would be better than any Hill team has done before. Look even 'Daddy' – even Alice Deal takes shits. They're no different from us. If there's anything Bucky taught us, it's that. He'll tell you all over again when he gets here.

Fantasy Jones, Al signed.

He'll show.

But as a near full roster of 15 Oak players and one soon-to-be ex-coach began rolling in the team bus, Tisch counted the buttons on his jersey like rosaries. Al snatched his hand before the Oak captain got too far and signed, *You better pray for him to plop from the sky like last time, or we go down alone.*

Chapter 34

“You have a very nice apartment...you have a very nice apartment...you...”

Having seen my father hypnotize the crowd at his induction in Canton, Ohio, with his down-home delivery and polished gags, and having roadied for the off-season orations, too, I know it's always best to open with levity – especially around potential hecklers. I finally got my lines down on the third swing back to Middleburg. So when Julie, tired and tomato-eyed, opens her apartment door in a nightie, I'm fully prepared with what I think is humor.

“Do you really think you can find someone who clears his throat and hocks as much as I do?”

Her sigh reminds me that heroes are not quickly forgotten.

“Someone who has to get up to blow his nose three times during sex?”

“Why do you do that?”

“Allergic to things that feel good.”

She sneezes something mucousy herself. Tis the season.

I hand her a hanky and push my luck. “You too?”

“Allergic to the opposite.”

She holds the door open, and I dart in before she regains her senses and kicks me and my bullshit to the curb.

“Would you like a glass of water? I’ve got some juice and milk.”

“Chocolate milk would be great.”

While she mixes it in the kitchen, I survey the environs: a cocoon of books, antique furnishings, and travel posters that look vintage. I worked for a guy in Colorado who’d taught me how to tell an original from a reproduction. A picture frame is face down on the lamp-table by the couch. I almost leap to see who’s lying face down, who could make a resurrection – I or Toby? Then she’s back with my milk. I’ve never been so thirsty. She watches my abdominal muscles push out one by one against my T-shirt as I gulp the whole glass.

“Thanks. Tastes good.”

“I couldn’t find the rat poison.” She offers for me to sit.

I take the couch. “It turns out I can hear.”

“It turns out I’m a fucking idiot.”

“Yeah,” I say, sort of dazed. “No!”

“Don’t worry. You can’t offend me more than you already have. And know what else? Remember I said I liked weird.”

“Yeah.”

“I guess I do have a problem with weird. Because what you’re doing is fucking weird with a capital W! I don’t know why, but *you* must.”

“Julie, I’m not any old weirdo. Everybody calls me—”

“Fucking bastard.”

“—Bucky. For Kenesaw Bucks. I’m into...burgers.”

“Dickbagger – the Phillies game...”

“C’est moi. And the autographed photo at the pizza place, that’s—”

“*You’re* Thunder Bucks’ son?”

“You’ve heard of him?”

“Everybody’s heard of him!”

They all know Thunder. Even the sports illiterates. And they’re always shocked to learn he’s my father.

“I’m not from Texas either by the way.”

“I knew there was something wrong with you!”

“There’s a lot wrong with me!”

Leaning off of her rocking chair, she’s ready to pounce but never comments or hustles me to quit about my family, how being a person is hard enough without being measured against The Almighty, how there are pros and cons to being a celebrity’s son, how I haven’t known anything else, and how a winding path brought Willie and Thunder to each other, broke them apart for what seemed like good until I, the scab, put them back together. I don’t give the full-blown version of events.

“Goodnight worked it out.”

“I don’t believe this! Did you serenade him, too?”

“No.” I stifle an absurd laugh. “Can I tell you something?”

“There’s more?” She gets up and opens the curtains. The sun rising over the street brightens her face. The shadows of cars fly across the walls.

“Yes. There’s more. Your laugh makes Lionel Ritchie sound like chronic indigestion. And Beethoven, too, for that matter. And if it’s any consolation, you’re the best – person that’s happened to me in a long time.”

“Congratulations,” she says. “On the other hand, you may be the worst *thing* that’s *ever* happened to me! NO-THING comes close!” She turns from the window. Her face is splotchy with emotion. “Why aren’t you in school? I mean a school fit for you?”

“I was.”

“What happened?”

“I got sidetracked.”

“I’ll say!”

I avoid looking at her and cough more than once.

“Are you gonna be a man and level with me?”

Pinned by my betrayal of her, I feel as powerless as I’ve been at the plate lately, and knowing all the trying in the world will not undo my dirty work, I feel a puffy numbness in my cheeks. I slither out from under the load with a burp, “I’ve been working out some things. Are men allowed to do that?”

She smirks. “Depends.”

“Three years I have needed to discuss something with Willie.” I bite into my lip, terrified of what might follow.

“And?”

“Things got very confusing, Julie.”

“What’s confusing about right and wrong?”

“What’s confusing about right and wrong? Are you serious? What I’ve had to say, to ask Willie, I – finally did it last night.”

“Go on.”

“When I got to Hill, I was a very fucked-up person at the time.”

“How would you rate yourself now?”

“Semi.”

She snorts.

“I made a commitment to Willie. So I made the most of it. Next thing I know I’m sitting in your office. How could I know you’d end up being my best friend?”

Julie looks at me as if I were a sweet she simply can’t pass up, but then the bitter reality fills her mouth. “You lied to me *over and over*. And to a lot of other people.” She grimaces at a spot on the wall above my head. “Toby would’ve never done that.”

“I thought nobody loved that relationship.”

“At least it *was* a relationship! How do I explain this? I felt sad for you. I was *inspired* by you! I *worried* about you! You were *my hero*.”

“That’s not a relationship either! That much I know. Look, I’m still me. It’s still my level of insecurity. The gambling, the drinking, the perverted stuff – all true.”

“What perverted stuff?”

“No – um, well – a tennis skirt from time to time would be nice...look, all I’m saying is: I’ve only been supposedly deaf a few weeks. And I only lied about things that needed to be lied about. Do you have any idea how it feels to lie to people who can’t hear you?”

“Pitiful. Feeble and pathetic.”

“To deceive someone as kind and sincere as you?”

“No character. Creepy,” she hisses.

“A creep, indeed. A supreme creep. For Willie. But if I’d told you everything, you would’ve been faced with having to lecture me and lose Willie his job, or be an accomplice. So I thought I’d take it out of your hands as long as possible by keeping my mouth shut. Considering the circumstances, that was not such a bad thing. Right?”

“Considering the circumstances, I’m elated you can hear! But I don’t know why since the trusting is out the window. And how do I forgive?” She mutters, “Big handsome fake.” She sits up, alert. “Have you always had that scar?”

“Yeah. I mean – since you’ve known me.”

She goes back to the rocker and sinks in it. Whatever she’s feeling, she suppressing from me. It comes across as over-medicated numbness. Boldly, I kneel at her feet and take her hand. When I touch the dent where Toby’s ring had been, I feel I’ve got the go-ahead to keep groveling. I should give her everything about Thunder’s death: that he’d destroyed Willie because he couldn’t face the music. And that very thought gives me an idea.

“What about the Beach Boys?”

“Now it’s their fault? Hell’s Bells...you heard me sing!” Her face pinches like a crab’s.

“Twice. Quick note – it’s ‘Hey, *little thing*, let me light your candle’ not ‘Hey, pretty baby.’ See we all make mistakes—”

Her eyes whip at me.

“Back to the Beach Boys. On every album cover they posed with surfboards. But none of them could surf.”

A bray jitters out – impossible to tell if she’s laughing at me or with me.

“*Ever surfed* in their lives! Did they not mean well?”

“Now you’re going to tell me the Beach Boys can’t surf?”

“Never could. I don’t think they got around all that much.”

“Well, I guess that’s showbiz!”

But I’m on a roll, and she’s still listening to me. “Another fact: the school is going to can the baseball team if we don’t win the league. That’s the deal President Miller made with the Board. Win the league or the budget for baseball goes. And Goodnight gets his new science lab.”

“What does any of that have to do with Kenesaw Bucks?”

I cup her face in my hands. “I couldn’t say no to Willie. What do you call that in your language?”

“Acting out. Not *acting in*.”

“But you said it yourself the other day: it’s not like we fixed games.”

“You fixed everything!”

“According to the NCCA, I’m okay. It’s a Hill technicality I’m not deaf.”

“What about the financial aid?”

I channel Thunder for the final spin. “I think I’ve represented the deaf community fairly and decently. I have been a model deaf person. And I deliberately left Joe Hanks’s records intact.”

“Who?”

“Old Hill baseball star. See. Nobody cares about Division III baseball.”

Her tears well. A lot of little drops that slow into shaking weeps. I wish there were a way to measure sorrow so I could devise a plan to kill it. This much upset you give flowers. This much upset you say sorry every day for the rest of your life. But with this much upset, I begin by pawing at the hair stuck to her cheeks. Nuzzling her neck, I try for a kiss, but she rolls her head away.

“This is not about baseball,” she says.

“I never meant for anyone to get hurt. Least of all you,” I say in a dry wheeze.

“You say you owed Willie. I’m willing to believe that. I’m going to ask one last time. Why?”

I scratch a fluffy sideburn, squelch the aches, and go for the door. “Doesn’t matter, Julie.”

“Wait. I’m not – done with you, yet.”

I collect myself on the couch, fine with whatever pittance she might flick my way, and it sure seems not much as she stands over me, legs and breasts taunting.

“It had to be hard having a famous father. Some people had fathers who were average, and some had fathers who were nobodies. Some had a new one every week. That was hard, too.”

Holding tight to the sofa’s arm, I feel myself spin, a dizzied passenger, in one of those shadow cars as they whirl and they twirl and they tango across the walls. Julie settles next to me as she had on that first day in her office. It’s time to sing a ding and a dango. I feel green in the cheeks as I give up the goods on Thunder though she really doesn’t need them to know every band of my DNA and billions of unused and occasionally tapped brain cells.

She clasps her hands around mine and gazes toward the window. Her nightie reveals almost everything. “When you let your neuroses prioritize things for you – that’s a problem,” she says.

“More information, please.”

“Remember I told you about the tunnel of self-annihilation?”

I draw a blank.

“The first day in my office.”

“I wasn’t listening then.”

“Get out of there. Now! You can’t save your dad. You could never save Willie.”

“That’s kind of a selfish way to look at it.”

“My big take-away from our sessions, Kenesaw. Can I call you that?”

“Yes. Kenesaw’s good.”

“My takeaway is that in some cases you can only save yourself. Your dad and Willie may have started this fire in you, but it’s your fire now. You’re the only one who can put it out.”

I remember the championship game and look at my watch.

“Are you listening now?”

I nod.

“Because this might sound different from what I’ve told you before. You gotta do what’s right for you and you only. Without ever looking back. Or you’ll *never* be right for you...or anyone else.”

Is there something for me in those three little words? Other than Julie's on-the-spot analysis that there's no way of my making up for what Thunder had done. Only living with it, and hopefully finding a way out of that tunnel, or that well, or unwell, or the Muskrat song...

"The Captain and Tenille!" I point at the ceiling. Still number one in the radio game. No, they can't take that away from me.

"With a capital W," she says and rolls her eyes.

I'm thumping grab her thighs and kiss her. She doesn't seem ready for even a peck, so I tell her thanks for being such a big help and so long.

We stand, our bodies lightly touching.

"What will you do?" she asks.

"I guess I'll know when I get there."

"I hope I don't read about it in the papers."

And though my pipes freeze at those words, my legs lug me out the door. I turn back to her. "This may not have been the Hill way, Julie. But everybody breaks the rules sometime."

"I wish that was all you'd broken." The door closes gently in my face, and my heart finally wrecks like a flat bicycle. Limping off, equipment bag slung over my shoulder, gaining weight with every step, I say, "Well guess what? I don't drink coffee anyway."



The cameraman misses Willie's streak by the last Giant defender, concentrating instead on the big paw that jars the ball from Thunder's hand. As the final second runs off the game clock, Thunder, in a billow of jerseys, digs the ball from the turf before tucking it to his broken ribs and slipping through a slit in the pocket. Nothing but daylight ahead. He points Willie to zig to the other corner and cocks his throwing arm. Sidney Jones throws off a blocker. Stolid and stony, Thunder sets his feet and offers the All-Pro defensive lineman a free shot - a bloody, bruising, concussive bang that's too late to cancel the prettiest spiral ever captured on video.

Thunder misses Willie's leaping catch. He misses Willie's end zone kneel. He misses his wife and kids' teary joy. But between chuffs of bile, Thunder distinctly hears the Eagle Announcer say: "Give thanks, Willie. You just caught a pass from God."

As he rides on his teammates' shoulders, God obliges the camera with a wide, lips-only never-quit smile.

Chapter 35

A bronze statue of Orville "Thunder" Bucks towers from a brick and mortar pedestal outside Gate 12 at Veterans Stadium in a stinky corner of South Philadelphia where gingko berries lace the refinery air.

I stand like so many worshipers before in the shade of the monument. Above the Vet's empty lot, my father's face changes expression in the light; sometimes ponderous, sometimes receptive until a cloud shaped like an Oldsmobile parks on the sun.

“Of course great sports fables are the Bucks way—” I start. “Now, I’m talking to statues.” The bronze features don’t move. “Talking to statues take two. Dad, you—”

A security guard swims into the outskirts of my watery view, barking, “Hey whack-job!”

I don’t veer from the statue. “*You*,” he make a fist. “*You* – coulda been great out here, too, Dad. And I will always wish you were here.” I take the #12 pendant off my neck and toss it around my father’s. Brushing my eyes, he sling the bundle of junk back over my shoulder. “No matter what.”

The Olds drives off the sun, and Thunder beams.

As I go, the security guard checks the statue for damage and finds a diamond-studded pendant in the shape of the #12 hanging about the neck. The security guard dances from foot to foot, probably torn between scoring a six-pack or starting a college fund for the twins (not Covalowski).

Chapter 36

Jim Thorpe stadium was named when the legend bopped four round-trippers out of the former minor league park in a single game. The semi-pros moved out in the 1950s. Boys Club, Babe Ruth, and American Legion teams bickered from sun-up to sundown over who got to use it for games and practices. With no municipal funding, the stadium had become an eyesore by ’65. In the ’70s high school kids parked in the outfield and drank. Some got pregnant. Some went to war. In the ’80s it became a place for gangs to settle their differences, often permanently for one side or another. But in 1995, with the local economy on the rebound, Trenton subsidized improvements. Retro was in, so the city council aimed to resurrect Thorpe, refurbish its WPA architectural soul, and recall its former charm. If you asked what Willie thought about all that, he would’ve said something like, *Any of you guys know, ‘Yank my doodle’?*

So that nobody would ask him he grouched, “Oh say can you see...” at the clean-cut infield grass to the dusty infield dirt, hard as concrete, still encrusted with broken bits of glass that sprayed colored light under the sun. Willie impatiently scanned the wispy chalk foul lines, the plywood outfield fence advertising enterprises long forgotten by the Chamber of Commerce, the old green stands that extended behind the backstop netting down the third and first base sides, the four stadium light towers standing like gray lollipops, and the flapping flag that boasted only 48 stars above the open press booth where a tape recorder played the national anthem into the announcer’s microphone and out of the loudspeaker mounted next to it. There wasn’t a ripple to the sky, a spot of haze, or a pale day moon. Just blue air for days that could take you anywhere you wanted to go.

Had he anything for breakfast that morning, Willie would’ve lost it. In all of that eye-roving, he had hoped to glimpse Kenesaw Bucks. The announcer, a reformed alcoholic and smoker in a sun visor and golf pants, introduced the Oaks and the Crusaders and welcomed everyone to the 2002 Middle Atlantic League Championship game. Willie counted every face in the crowd: the fat, loud, obnoxious contingent of Alice Deal parents, frat brothers, and what they still called co-eds. In the first base stands behind Hill’s dugout, Goodnight winked demonically at Willie, snapping an implied pair of suspenders with his lab-stained thumbs. Elaine’s ruddy locks were tied back in a knot. She dragged her good graces into the stands like the virgin

queen. The stands were SRO for once, but neither Bucky LaMar nor Julie Ross was in the house.

Though not in a joking mood, Willie stalled the umpiring crew with all the zingers he could remember from the can, pausing and pulling his beard during his delivery. After nine straight duds, the head ump cut him off and went over Thorpe stadium's ground rules for the coaches. Willie was quick to interrupt with dim questions, such as, "If the ball is hit over the fence in the air is it a homerun?"

"We accept forfeits," the Alice Deal Coach, Silver Duke Donnelly, said.

Willie discussed the terms of the offer to buy any time he could. The only reason he wasn't doing a salmon flop at home plate in some rendition of asthma city was that he was feeling a win today was possible. He didn't know where it came from or why, but the wind was picking up, and a sound was growing. A helicopter? Willie kept the glare back with his palm as he grinned witlessly upward, expecting a grandiose entrance. *My man Bucks*, he thought. A New Jersey state trooper decal on the machine's door flashed as it dipped hard after two punks who suddenly appeared ahead of the skids, juggling a pile of hubcaps across the infield and out of the stadium. Willie kicked himself all the way back to the dugout, holding his ribs. Without Bucky, he knew his players were in a game they weren't ready for, with no one to blame but their fool coach.

With the magic marker job still holding up on the uniforms, even in a splatter of mid-day sun, Al signed to Tischler, *So Blackie, where's your boy?*

Willie lurched down the dugout stairs. Tisch signed to him, *Let's do this damn thing, Uncle Willie.*

Willie called himself birdbrain and collapsed on the bench.

Ready with a cigarette, Al signed, *Looks like you could use some anti-freeze.*

Willie's lips pruned to the smoke.

Tisch slapped the cigarette out of Al's fingers and signed, *Put that away.*

"Birdbrain," Willie mumbled idly again. His eyes did a slot machine number, and he passed out in his nephew's arms. Hartung and Lefty Lopez cleared the bench, and Wayne arranged Willie flat on his back. His eyes reopened. He got himself slanted across the dugout wall. His afro curved like smoke from a chimney. His lips were still sphinctering for a smoke, but it was for the half-cig he hoped his cellmate at Graterford would have ready for him. What was of immediate concern was that his last act as a free man not be subjecting the decrepit Oaks to one final beating. And secondarily if their last memory of him would be of this glassy, cross-eyed, smoky-headed, putrid humiliation. He clenched his teeth till they squeaked. "Wake me up if he gets here."

Tisch hovered.

"Go on. Git!" Willie jerked loose the thread that held in the toes of his right Docksider, used it to floss breakfast from his teeth, and blacked out.

His eyes did not open again until the fifth inning. He thought *this* might be the swoon. The scoreboard had the Crusaders leading 2-1. Not only had the Oaks not disgraced themselves, but one swing of the bat could tilt things in their favor. And with the hot stick big Wayne had been swinging lately...

Willie thought he'd stretch the old knee and poke his head around. Elaine was yakking and signing to people in the crowd. There were new faces, evidently previously unaccounted for Hill wagon-jumpers. A continuous stream of alums had come toting homemade cardboard signs, advertising the years they graduated. None of this was lost on Goodnight, his self-satisfaction

souring into what might now be described as the runs. Willie's late night work had paid off. It was a welcome distraction for him to read all the different years: '77, '95, '88, '83, '69 and so on. In their midst was an elder statesman, still rangy and strong. The man had a head of thin white hair and a sly, green-eyed look. As soon as he raised his Class of '50 sign, Willie knew him from his picture on the equipment room wall. Joltin' Joe Hanks was the only Hill College baseball player ever to get a professional baseball offer and take it. For half a season with the St. Louis Browns's farm club in Billings, he led Single A in homeruns and stolen bases. But by the All-Star break, he'd had enough of being the odd man out. Joe winked at Willie. Willie belched a tear of joy. *Maybe we are going to be saved*, he thought, as he lowered his moisture-sopped eyes to ground level.

Who would have thunk heaven had always been so close, just across the river in Jersey?

Willie exhaled, and a shrub behind the dugout swayed. It almost seemed alive. The whole world did. Willie took another lungful and pulled himself together. But as the shrub neared, Willie made out the leftover shreds of a green blazer. "Huh-huh-huh," Willie said like nothing would ever surprise him again.

Sweet Lou Ellison peek-a-booed his fat thumbtips through moth-holes in the lapels of his jacket and chuckled self-consciously, "Broke out the old duds."

"Huh-huh-huh," Willie said again.

"You look, uh...you look all grown up, Willie."

Willie wished he could say the same about Lou, but the sportswriter still had that kid's desperate-for-his-big-break look plastered to his face. Though his hazel eyes seemed closer to the surface than in earlier times, they still floated in their watery sockets like buoyant turds. Willie had thought that the bloody coagulation in the corners of those eternally drooping eyes would've been cried out by now, but the red triangles remained as a prominent reminder to the world that the reporter was above tears.

Willie said, "The Allentown Morning Call. Long ass way from Super Bowl Sunday, hah, Sweetness?"

"It's been nearly a decade, Bub. Think we could bury the hatchet?"

"Sure." Willie turned his back on him, arms spread. "Go for it."

"I would like to do a story on your team. This is incredible what you've done. It wouldn't hurt your rep for the world to know."

"A better story. You driving your car out this lot and off the Ben Franklin Bridge."

Lou whistled a high note. "We gonna play it straight? All right. Where's the man of the hour?"

"I figured you'd know."

"Me? No. I just take anonymous calls."

Elaine had cut the schmoozing to watch Willie. Willie could see she was keeping tabs on him and Goodnight. She must've seen the professor call out to Willie, "Where is he?"

Willie watched the American flag rustle up high. He couldn't stand to think what Elaine's bugging eyes were up to as she wondered where Bucky LaMar was and what connection there might be between Willie and the recently-arrived fat green bastard. Yet when Willie viciously swung his eyes at Goodnight, he was pleased to perceive almost as much discomfort brewing inside the professor. Because now, if the kid had disappeared, Goodnight would have an unenviable time proving who LaMar was and that he wasn't deaf. And there was no accounting for the amount of blood shed by bleeding hearts. The Board could, for instance,

decide that – after this maiden voyage to the league championship – wiping out the Oaks might be a little harsh.

Nevertheless, since this was the kind of hijinks Willie now dabbled in, he could hear the clinking of his life adding up to chump change. Arminta deserved much better than he'd ever given her. So did the Oaks. But he still had that chump change to give to them. He leaned to Lou Ellison and whispered, "Here's my tip. They're just people. Be sweet, Lou. Let 'em be."

"That song and dance coming from any other might work. But I got news for you, baby, and don't forget it: if you had told me the truth the first time around, rotten things might not have come to you. If you had told me the truth the second time, rotten things might not have come to me. I come only for the truth. And if the truth bears repeating – that is my job."

"News flash to you: you are still one angry bitter bald motherfucker, coverin' Division Z for the Allentown bitches."

Willie went in his dugout. So far the game had been a relatively soft-spoken affair. By nature this was how the Oaks played these days, turning down their text pagers, MP3s, and indiscriminate yowls. But the notoriously boisterous Alice Deal dugout was a crypt. The swagger was gone, a big cork stuck in the drinking-game-nickname chatter. They seemed to have one thing on their minds: claim this playhouse, since their own had been demolished.

The Crusaders had used up half of their plate chances, and Al Pagano's stuff was filthier than fine. His new wrinkle, a split-finger, was befuddling to more than one free-swinging Crusader. Conversely, there wasn't an easy out in the Oaks's line-up. In the fourth inning with the sacks full of Oaks, it took a leaping stab by the Deal second baseman to turn Scheinblum's liner toward the outfield gap into a double play and to produce an anxious roar of applause from the Deal partisans. Duke Donnelly was none too psyched that heroics were necessary. A paranoid, since his wife left him for his larger-endowed younger brother, The Duke was convinced the Oaks had been playing possum with his Crusaders for the past 15 years. Running his hands through his hair until his fingers were furry, he let his players know that Hill was not the same dog with fleas they used to kick around. He barked viciously to turn it up a notch or things could get very hideous for the Crusaders.

On the other side, the Oaks were toothpick cool. They followed Tischler's lead, conducting themselves as if fate had already determined they'd leave as champions and that playing the full nine was a mere formality. Willie bopped his head to his team's new strut. And trusting Jenna's steady hand, he loosened his cap so it rode high above his afro, sat back, and crossed one leg over the other.

Since this might be the last baseball game he'd be able to catch for a while, nothing was going to stop him from enjoying it.

Chapter 37

Top of the sixth, Jenna hustled to the third base coaching box and manufactured a run from the bottom of the order. Hill's right fielder, Doyle, dragged a bunt down first base that rolled foul, curved back, got chalky, and slept. The bulky catcher, Hunt, pushed Doyle over with a sacrifice. Next up was Snooter McDougal, normally the starting second sacker, who today, in Bucky LaMar's absence, had put on a performance worthy of note at shortstop. The only problem was, he couldn't hit his weight. But he was terrific at fouling off pitches. The infielders were already cheating on the grass for bunt number three. With McDougal already choking up,

Jenna signaled for him to fake the bunt to draw the infield closer, and then slash at the first thing he saw. The next pitch was around the plate. Snooter got a piece that nearly shot the first baseman dead. Doyle scampered in. The scoreboard credited Hill, and the game was tied, 2-2, suddenly anybody's for the taking. Willie was sure he must've kicked the bucket and ended up on the right side of the afterlife by a dimpled chad.

"McDungle," he said, slapping his cheeks. "McDongle." Then shouting his own disbelief, he pointed at the Crusader dugout, "Snooter!"

The Crusaders took their medicine like good little boys.

Jerry (yes, Jerry Covalowski, of the Covalowski twins), the new face in the Oak infield at second, stepped into the box with authority and McDougal on first. The mound ace, Bobby Blanks, brushed a heavy forearm across his brow, nodded at the catcher, bulled his neck, and flicked a white dart at Jerry's chin stubble. Jerry shrugged back then hunkered over the dish for the next offering. Blanks glared, kicked, and winged a tasty one, on the inside half. Jerry saw what we wanted but didn't have the hammer to pull it down the line. Jammed on his thumbs, the ball was chopped into a six-to-four-to-three double play.

The rest of the sixth and all of the seventh passed without a gasp from the crowd as both pitchers methodically retired the sides. With the ninth inning drawing nigh, nerves thrummed in both dugouts. While the Oaks clung uneasily to an air of nonchalance, forcing out jokes whenever possible, the Alice Deal Crusaders fretted about dining on a steady diet of crow in the off-season. They dug their fingers and snapped at each other. They walked up and down their dugout, swinging at phantom pitches and huddling in the cool breezes they made.

Willie was having a party watching the stars burn out in the Crusaders's eyes. He noticed that for the first time since he'd been at Hill, the Crusader bench was avoiding him and not vice versa. Silver Duke looked like last week's newspaper on the back porch – yellow and old. Willie banished any thoughts of Lou or Goodnight. Why worry? Lou's credibility vanished long ago – a bitter old man with a chip on his shoulder. Bucks was gone with the blueprints. The plan executed to near perfection.

That is, until two down in the bottom of the eighth: Al Pagano walked a batter, fell behind on the next count 3-0 to his nemesis, Bobby Blanks, and looked past Jenna to Willie.

Willie signed, *No free passes*. So Al took a page out of Crazy Sain's book, and fired a heater into Blanks's ribs. The kid went down hard but got up and humped to first without a cross word. The umpire gave Al a warning, and for appearance's sake, Willie sent Jenna to settle Al down.

In baseball, there's already plenty of standing-around time; that's the reason you hear people say walks are killers. The fans aren't the only ones who yawn. The fielders count dandelions, swat gnat clouds, and kick back instead of hopping on their toes and leaning in on every pitch. Errors happen, momentum shifts. When Jenna got to the mound, Al batted his eyelids in annoyance. His glove, which he wanted to bust upside her head, dripped clammy sweat.

Calmly, Jenna took the ball from his hand. She folded her arms, looked him up and down, and signed, *You tired?*

No, I'm not tired.

Well, the fucking outfielders are! And with spectacles bulging, she shoved the ball back in his glove.

Al was so livid he overthrew the next pitch. It ticked off Hunt's mitt and rolled to the backstop. Deal runners advanced to scoring position. Having his changeup on a string all day,

though, Al worked the count even and teased a sure inning-ender to Jerry at second. Though throughout the game both second basemen had scuffed away the bits of glass in the infield bed, this ball found one. It badhopped Jerry off the heel of his glove, and skipped across his chest, and down his arm. Alice Deal took the lead back, 3-2. Still two outs, and now runners at the corners. After conferring with Willie, Jenna sent Al red-faced and whining to the outfield and brought in Lefty Lopez to deal with the Crusaders's left-handed homerun-hitter, who was taking practice swings at the sun's golden hum. He was as tall and broad-beamed as the moose and had forearms like bowling pins. He tinkered with his batting gloves.

The Crusaders had never faced Lefty before. They knew he was no threat at the plate and an adventure in the field. Watching his warm-up pitches, however, was fascinating. The precision with which Lefty painted the corners with big sweeping deuces would've been incredible enough if the pitcher didn't have one eye on the catcher's mitt and the other eye staring them down in the dugout. It boggled the defending champs' brains to think how devastating Lefty might be if both eyes were going in the same direction.

Lefty's first two benders had the homerun-hitter bailing and the umpire hissing, "Stee..." The runner on first was equally thrown by Lefty's cross-eyed look. From the stretch, Lefty's good eye froze the runner and his bad one spotted home. As the count ran to 0 and 2, both batter and runner determined they'd play Lefty by not looking at his face. Lefty had a mind to back the batter off the plate, then press his flirtation with the outside corner. But for Lefty it was harder to throw a straight ball crooked than a crooked ball straight. He eased into his smooth and long delivery, the ball flew up the gut at the letters, and the batter walloped it to deep center field.

Willie stood.

This shot was hit deeper, harder, and higher than Willie's longest rope that day at practice. And if Tisch caught up to it, there would be a lot more than flimsy little pickets waiting. The wall was big and thick. But Tisch began tracking the pill over one shoulder, then the other, then lowered his head and sprinted at the gray brontosaurus on the Hough's Sinclair sign in dead center. The Alice Deal bench crowded their dugout steps and spun their caps backwards. They whipped hand towels as if the disturbance of air might help the ball transition from can of corn to three-run tater. If this one left the park, the Oaks would be down 4 with only one more set of licks against a kid who came out of the vagina throwing strikes. But as the ball lost a little bit of smoke, Tisch gained. He felt as if he'd run half the day. Goodnight struggled *not* to take his feet. In the thin, lifeless voice he'd used a million times before, Lou Ellison said, "Goodbye, Mr. Spalding." The Alice Deal fans nipped from their flasks. Glued to the action, Willie yanked off his cap to watch his nephew roar to the warning track as though he were going to crash through the plywood. In full stride, toeing a knothole in the fence, Tisch leaped above its line, turned his torso, and stabbed the drive with his outstretched glove.

Silence bombed the field, the stands, and both dugouts.

Willie jumped the same time Tisch did and luckily, everybody was looking at his nephew and not him, because otherwise they'd have seen the coach get a tonsure from the dugout ceiling.

The Hill fans rose around Goodnight, whose majestic posture was humbled. The Crusaders turned their hats round straight and grudgingly added to the applause. Glaring at the fence, the Crusaders's big shooter tore off his batting gloves and blocked Tisch as he jogged off. Offering his hand for a shake, the hitter said with a confounded and respectful smile, "That was big league, man. Let's hope there's a scout in the crowd."

It took Willie the other half of the day to come over to Tisch in the dugout. He extended his open palms at his side for a long time, then frowned and moved away. He touched the

soreness on his head and remembered when he was a player how people talked about the way, after a scintillating play, Willie's smile lit the stadium like a disco ball. You could look into it and see all that was possible in yourself. During interviews, he dedicated that smile to his nephew and the ladies. But Tisch never quit being deaf. And Willie knew that it wasn't anything to do with the smile that got him the babes.

With a curt swipe, he ordered his nephew over.

Jenna patted Tisch's ass. He went to his uncle, ready for the sermon on how Willie would've done the play better.

Willie signed, *Just like they do it on TV*, and hugged him.

Sweet Lou craned his mouth into the dugout. "His name wouldn't happen to be Mays, would it?"

Willie was choking on another question. Was it normal to require a member of your family to display superhuman effort in order for you to show them affection? "*That*," Willie declared right there in his nephew's ear – the one that could only hear the Alice Deal second baseman cough up phlegm – "is some fucked-up shit."

Hill players were still trying to squeeze around them when Al, heading to the bat rack, crowded to Willie and signed to Tisch, "Will you homos excuse me?"

The Oaks were on the ropes in the ninth inning of the championship game, and Al Pagano knew this was no time for lovey-dovey baseball.



On the way to Little League games, Thunder drives you up the wall playing "What if?"

"Kenesaw, what if the score's tied? One out in the eighth and men on first and third?"

"Two up the middle, corners in."

"1st inning, second and third, nobody out, down two -"

"Play's at first."

"Same situation eighth inning -"

"Infield up."

"What if -"

"What if we turn the radio on, Dad?"

"One more."

"Okay, Dad. One more," you say.

"Ninth inning. What if -"

Chapter 38

As naïve as I was about Willie and Dad's partnership, there's no getting around it: Willie Chance was my other boyhood idol. And if Willie said I'm my own man now, then I believe I must be getting close. That and not having a razor handy makes me look older than my years. For the first time in a while, my sinuses and vision are clear, and my rump feels mint condition. The only hitch is that with all the psychodrama of the last few days, I'm fried. This has a normalizing effect: feeling not a single inch taller or smaller. I feel my own height, which happened to put me a full head taller than Lou Ellison.

At the concession counter behind the grandstand, Sweet Lou to tears himself away from meticulously coating his brat with relish and mustard. He looks up wonderously, "You're—you're—"

“You’re missing a great game!” I bend down and squall in the reporter’s hairy ear. I leave the sweaty ball of shit and his blood-bubbling eyes and slip under the bleachers to the Hill dugout.

Lou blows his nose and drawls, “That’s quite an accent you got there, boy. You pick that up in Texas? God might frown upon you if you play this game.”

At one time such Thunderesque allusions might’ve persuaded me to brawl with toughs and come-to in a bar’s toilet in Flagstaff with a scar resembling a child’s drawing of a butthole on my cheek. Now this is just a string of words that breaks the air and disintegrates before my next step hits the ground.

Lou isn’t the only one glad to see me. No matter the final tally, Goodnight now has the goods.

Willie doesn’t ask where I’ve been or why. He just tosses me a uniform. The team applauds, and the coast seems clear for a little feeling of hope. After I receive a round of hand slaps, Al rounds up the club and tells them that anyone foolhardy enough to address LaMar by anything other than his god-given names, Slim and Mr. Ninth Inning, can expect to spend the ride home getting their tonsils polished by a jockstrap that hasn’t been washed in a fortnight.

The Oaks need a run to stay alive. The only question I keep asking myself is whether I’ll swing and miss to keep Willie a free man, or swing for the fences and my teammates’ dreams. Willie cocks a calculated eye at me for the answer, but I merely bite off a fingernail and spit it high into the sky.

Al goes to the plate to make history. His heart more or less whispers. After four years facing Bobby Blanks, he knows what to expect from the meathead – hard stuff, up and in. Opening his stance as the fastball rises inside, the lefthanded batter steps off the plate and laces a double into the left field gap. The Hill faithful pound the stands around Goodnight. The Hill bench, led by Willie, cheers as Al stands on second. Grinning broadly, he reads my thoughts, *The devil, it seems, is made of Teflon.*

Before Lou can sit, a pregnant woman’s thigh oozes into his seat. He sits on her lap until she bumps the line down.

For the first time all day, Blanks’s skin is springing leaks all over. His arm hangs heavily from the high number of pitches he’s thrown.

From the Crusaders’s dugout stairs, Coach Donnelly calls out soothingly to his pitcher. “Say, big guy – looked like he missed the bag on his way to second. Appeal it.”

Willie clucks at the Crusaders’s desperate maneuvering. Blanks nodded tentatively at his coach and flips the ball to the first baseman, who tags first and tells the field ump about the challenge. The ribbon-thin ump is sporting a sarcastic smile, too big for his face. Padding over from the grass behind the pitcher’s mound, he hears out the Deal firstbaseman and seems positively disdainful that it’s taken this long for anyone to notice his presence.

“Huh,” was all he says and plucks his lip with his pinkie. Then he turns, points across the infield at Al, throws his thumb at the Hill dugout, and hollers, “You’re OUTTA THERE!”

The Hill fans leap from their seats and begin a shrill, slurred chorus of “Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit!” Conducting the throng is Joe Hanks, the former Hill great who had fled the oft-crooked calls of baseball to Wall Street, where he’d spent four decades racking up a small fortune. With a deep-pocketed alum leading the cheer, Elaine enthusiastically joins in. Even Lou, who’d seen the dirt plume when the little Italian kid kicked the bag and who has witnessed some mealy-mouthed calls in his days, thinks this one might take the cake. The young sports reporter in him awakens at the broad daylight robbery of a kid’s heart and soul by the twitchy

eyes and win-at-all-costs smile, cutting from one end of the Deal dugout to the other. He draws a quick sketch of the play before also falling in with the irate crowd. Goodnight joyously sings his own tune of “Bullshit”. He mops the sweat off his greasy scraggles and stuffs the hanky in his pocket before any rowmates can smell his bias on the prevailing wind. None will because the alums are completing their program by sleeting Thorpe Stadium with “Hill Class of” signs. Across the infield, the Crusaders duck, dart, and dive to avoid injury. The Deal first base coach and third baseman sustain paper cuts.

Jenna dispatchs the twins to drag Al off by his snake tattoos before he gets himself institutionalized. While all the Hillies might’ve gotten a big kick out of the Crusaders’s clutzing around and beseeching the umps to do something about the fans’ onslaught, the defending champs’ cowardice is upstaged by another first. No one had ever seen Al Pagano cry. Stumped, the Oaks watch big Wayne sit on him in foul territory until Al’s pep drains out.

Willie’s arguing with an umpire is a new one on the Oaks, too. He kneels to indicate the mark Al’s foot had left on the first base bag during its gallop to second – still fresh.

“I musta missed it.”

“Musta missed it? Are you the umpire?”

“I am one of the two umpires.”

“Then y’ain’t paid to miss!”

“Ain’t paid to miss?” The field ump smiles sarcastically again. “Miami. Winds light off the gulf. Nobody in ten yards. Ten yards, Chance! Set me back a paycheck. Ain’t paid to miss.” He turns his back and walks away.

Willie’s mouth hangs like the back end of a garbage truck. He takes his case to a higher court. The plate ump leaves his mask down and says through the bars, “October 12, 1992. The Meadowlands. Am I ringing any bells, Lightning?”

Willie slouchs to the bench. But not before telling the umps they’re jokes and the league’s a joke. He has Jerry Covalowski fetch the athletic-tape shears from the med kit. He takes the shears to his beard and afro and leaves several inches of protest on the floor.

It does nothing for Crazy Sain. Pinch-hitting for Lefty, he gets fooled on a changeup and tinks one that the catcher guns to first for out number two.

Bald again, in clothes that don’t fit – after Luke places the gigantic size 9 cap on his head and the busted threads dangle over his eyes like beads off a lampshade – Willie tilts his face up. He peers from under the brim of his cap for the convict bus to carry him home. Because with two away in the ninth, the future of the Hill College baseball program rests on the shoulders of – “Now batting: Wayne Raines,” the announcer says.

“Who named this fucking kid?” Willie mumbles. He’s getting little solace knowing that I’m on deck and his nephew is in the hole.

Across the way, Alice Deal’s normal disposition returns, which means they’ve left the human race behind. They shoot the ball around the bases, hot-dogging for the fans, flapping their lips. They’re one out from victory but in their hearts they know it’s over. Stepping in front of home plate, the Deal catcher raises two fingers, and hollers, “Two away...and here comes number three!”

Wayne sweats every jittery step to the batter’s box, boats soggy with perspiration.

In the dugout, Al wipes the residue off his cheeks and signs to Willie, *You couldn’t fit a toothpick up his ass.*

The catcher is humming the theme song for Ringling Brothers. The infielders join in, and Bobby Blanks steps off the mound, unable to keep a straight face. The shortstop falls on his ass,

and the rest pound their leather as if it hurts to breathe. Wayne, the other Hill players, and the Hill fans don't know what to make of this display. Did someone cut the cheese? Frankly, it releases some of the moment's tension. Wayne steps back from the plate and shrugs at Jenna in the third base coach's box.

I'm swinging a pile of bats in the on-deck circle when fatigue finally clocks me. I raise my weary head to the crowd where Sweet Lou Ellison is taking notes, Goodnight is giving me the high sign, and Elaine is clinging quizzically to our every move. I can't help looking over at Willie, who seems trapped anywhere but the present.

Willie has expected Alice Deal's croaking all day. Now he gets a performance that boxes his ears until an idea rattles out. Suddenly he remembers why they'd made him coach. From the box alongside third, Jenna sees him gesture to her. Guardedly she reads his sign. As she goes through the baseball mumbo-jumbo from A to Z for Wayne – tug of the cap, swipe across the chest, up and down each arm, finger to the eye, to the elbow, back to the eye, palms down both pant legs, up one, across the belt – she slips in their coach's brilliant stroke.

Wayne steps into a sandy box, where the chalk has been mashed into the dirt. And what broken squiggles remain in the back, he obliterate with a sweep of his size fourteens. Blanks leans in for the sign, a big grin marring his face. As the pitch comes in high, Wayne strides backward, farther from the pitch, and swings powerfully into the catcher's glove hand. The ball and mitt vault over Bobby Blanks's head and fall in the grass behind the pitcher's mound. Now the only sounds coming from the Alice Deal infield and dugout are the catcher's snivels as he curls in a ball and weeps. Wayne looks nonchalantly at the ump, who points down first and screams, "Catcher's interference! Take your base!"

There's no reason for Silver Duke to argue the call since the mitt has been separated a good 70 feet from the catcher's hand. But he runs out to the ump anyway and snarles at Willie, "Foul balls don't count, bitch."

"Speaking of foul balls," Willie cackles, "how's your ex?"

With a sob in his throat, the catcher sends his coach back to the dugout.

The ump allows the catcher a few warm-up pitches. For each punch of the mitt, there is a burst of tears. Following the last throw, the catcher sniffs acutely, straightens his shin guards, and pulls his mask down. The umpire whisks off home plate.

I tell the ump I'm pinch-hitting for the Oaks's prematurely balding designated hitter, Scheinblum. I pick Wayne's stick out of the dirt and heave it to my shoulder.

The moment has come.

If you stay long enough, it always does. In the on-deck circle, Tisch and I had saluted each other with a jumping shoulder bang. Seeing the drag in my wheels, Tisch, who had thrown over red Twizzlers for Red Man, offered me a plug.

Now with my cheek filled to capacity and my left eye bulging like the blue sky, I thrash the air and finally understand what it means to be my own man. Part my father and part not my father – sometimes a dirtball, sometimes not, and not necessarily in that order. I'll be good at some things and hopeless at others. I take my stance over the plate. I hinge my knees, wait for the pitcher to kick, and wish that Julie could be my witness.

The wind that dries my eyes and cruises my sinuses could've come from the slam of the catcher's mitt or my whiff, but I don't remember either one, just Willie's crying, "No more déjà vu, please. Just a homerun-homerun." Wasting no time, Blanks rears. A forkball splits the air. It is well within the huge club's range even as it dips to the low outside corner. The bat is a

windmill, and the ball hooks foul long before diving into a swimming pool in the development cater-corner from the left field fence.

“Hey-hey! Mr. Ninth Inning! Sometimes that apple falls just the right distance from the tree!” Willie slaps Luke and Jerry five apiece as they all watch the Deal bench scurry from their dugout to watch the steam rise from the foul ball’s meteoric plunge.

“Hit a ball that far, I’d give him a homerun,” Willie hears Silver Duke sneer at his players. “Nobody on this team ever hit a ball that far.”

Blanks’s gawk could swallow a bird. The catcher shakes the ace’s shoulder. Blanks finishes reading the advertisement of an extinct brand of shaving cream on the plywood in left center. He rubs his thumb across his index finger and the fat blister there squirts open; curveballs are out of the mix now.

Under the off-tempo din of BUTTY! BUTTY! BUTTY! he whispers heatedly to his man, “That’s the best ball I’ve thrown all day!”

The catcher jokes, “Shit, that ball went so far, a paternity suit was waiting for it. Come on. You’re better than he is. You’re a Crusader.”

“Ever seen him before?”

“One more strike and I probably never will again.”

“Hmm.”

“Hey, are you a Crusader?”

“Yeah – Crusader.”

“And what do Crusaders say?”

“Steroids are awesome?”

“That’s right. Steroids are *awesome*!”

But despite the weekly shots of Anabol, the Crusader battery can’t look me up and down, so they cut quick glances only.

“Hold on. Not Butty.” Blanks’s nerves return. “That’s Bucky. As in Bucky, Bucky, Bucky.”

“You know him?”

“Drove the earthmover that trashed our field.”

“Doesn’t look so big, not wrapped in metal.”

“Never put the go-ahead run on-base, but,” Blanks indicates Tisch, stretching in the on-deck circle, “Homes swings a banjo.”

“Robert Goodnight,” Elaine said, cramming next to him at the beginning of my at-bat. “You are the picture of good sportsmanship.”

Goodnight faced her so she could read his lips. “I came to show my support.”

“Would you mind showing some of it to the alums?”

“You know me, Elaine. Your basic research type.” He worried she was not going to let him savor the Oaks’s downfall in peace.

She nodded toward Lou Ellison, scribbling notes several planks below. “Research assistant?”

Goodnight saw in retrospect that he ought to have lobbed the information anonymously to Elaine first. If that brought no satisfaction, he would have been in a better position to contact Lou, instead of playing a game he didn’t know all the rules to. He was also wringing-wet-spooked that I might actually straighten one out. Pointing at the field, he waited for Elaine to look at him. When he had her attention, he signed so that she would not misread a thing.

Elaine, that boy is not named LaMar. He is not deaf. And I seriously doubt he has ever set foot in the state of Texas.

She also wanted to be clearly understood. “How did you come about such serious doubts?”

Research. I – contacted the Texas school directly.

Her orange eyebrows rose. “We’re not a research institution, Robert. The teachers teach. The administrators do – whatever administrators do.”

I know. I am sorry if I overstepped. You see, time was fleeting.

“For your science lab.”

Our science lab. And the integrity and reputation of the school.

“Integrity and reputation of the school. Yes, I see what you mean. Thank you for caring so much about Hill’s reputation, Professor.”

He stiffened.

“But most of all, thank you for alerting me to this information.” She nodded earnestly and got up.

In his most coordinated move in years, Goodnight stripped the ledge of sleep dust from both eyelashes and saw nothing but Elaine’s sagging flanks. Then Elaine sat back down.

“One more thing. And I’ll let you get back to the game. We *will* conduct an inquiry. If what you allege proves true, we’ll handle it our way. Privately and appropriately.”

Goodnight waited as if for the 0-2 offering.

“If however, that unusually interested party in the ratty green blazer thinks there’s anything more than a baseball game going on here, and if that person goes by Lou Ellison...”

The professor tried to swallow, but that’s a hell of a thing if your throat is cracking like a west Texas riverbed in July.

“...if for some reason those if’s come true, I’m going to put you in charge of preventing any scandalous stories from being published or broadcast about the LaMar boy, Coach Chance, or any other member of our baseball team.”

Me?

“When you knocked off the other night, you forgot the librarian’s magnifying glass. She found it by the printer with an article you had left behind. She was taking the article to you when she and I had lunch the next day. I saw the headline in her bag. The names ‘Chance’ and ‘Bucks’ made an impression. Probably the same way they did with you.”

That’s Thunder Bucks’s son! Chance set up the whole thing. Recovered the kid from rehab or worse. Evidently, our star player went off the deep end after his father ‘accidentally’ shot himself to death. Enter Willie Chance, a confidence man. This is just another one of his hustles.

Elaine seemed confused, so Goodnight let it rip, “He ain’t no saint!”

Elaine pinched her nostrils before leaning closer. These speeches were getting old. “Coach Chance paid his dues before ever coming to Hill. As far as I can tell, anything he has done in connection with the school, rightly or wrongly, wittingly or unwittingly has come from here.” She palmed her left bosom. “He never took a move against a science student, you, or the science department.”

They have stolen from everyone at this college, Elaine. And that is a felony.

“Ms. Ross tells me the kid at home base has a heart the size of Texas. He’s a straight A student that never causes trouble. Seems to me the US Attorney’s office would have bigger fish to fry. And if they don’t, the name ‘Bucks’ may still hold sway.”

Not if the name 'Bucks' can still sell newspapers.

"There are people, *here*," Elaine gestured to the alumni, "who can help you get a science lab, Professor." She tipped her chin at the reporter, head down, writing his column. "He is not one of them. If the press runs with this, the best that could happen is that two decent people's lives will be ruined and Hill will get painted as a hapless ship of fools. If that happens, do you really think I'm going to sit by quietly and allow the Board to make me choose between a new building and my people? A group that's scrapped its way into the championship?"

Goodnight's eyebrows broke like long cigar ashes.

"I'll see you at your tenure review in August, after you've taken care of Sweet Lou."

Nut-cutting time: Wayne, represents the tying run on first, the batter, the go-ahead run. The count is no balls for and two strikes against. I watch President Miller work through the crowd away from Goodnight. Digging into the box, I wag the bat above my head, wiggle my hips like a belly dancer, and get ready to leave the bat on my shoulder and keep Willie out of jail. Or bruise anything that inadvertently wanders into the strike zone. I look a mile past center, where Trenton's short skyscrapers are silhouetted in factory smog haze.

Bobby Blanks slides left on the rubber. He steps off and throws to first. Then he bends in with an unnatural look – as if he's already made up his mind what to do. Winding slowly, he kicks and slings a high hard hisser. *Willie's prayer has finally been answered*, I barely have time to think. Somehow in Jersey the intentional-unintentional had found me and my head, which now tolls the hour. If I weren't dribbling yellow streams of tobacco from my lips and raking the dirt for my wits, I'd thank Blanks for the trim. The benches empty. The umpires and coaches separate the players, and Blanks gets a warning from the ump. Now Hill has the tying run on second, the go-ahead on first, and a kid at home plate who seeks nothing more from life than to be a baseball star.

Tisch and his uncle share a proud look. The way Tisch grabs himself and rearranges his cup, the Hill alums would've never guess he's 0 for lifetime versus Alice Deal pitching. The wind can't make up its mind. As it blows in and out, Tisch can't tell if the infield grass is genuflecting or waving goodbye. On the horizon, copper strips wrinkle the deepening blue. The park's lights flicker on.

Blanks, the all-American, cuts a hulking form against the fading day at his back. After eight and two-thirds innings and the haircut he gave me, his arm is lank and loose and he seems to tremble with the extra steam he's going to lay on the pill.

Tischler, the stone-deaf kid, taps his bat on home plate and crouches. He doesn't easily fall in love with a pitched ball. All season long he's snubbed beauties that could've had dates with the man in the moon. He's been patient, watching them come and go, waiting for the right one. This at-bat is no exception. He works the count to full. As ball four fades at the dirt, Tisch cranks the stick and raps a bleater over Bobby Blanks's head. Playing shallow, the center fielder scoops the ball on the short-hop. Wayne left on contact. Jenna knows her moose is slower than a moose, but with the power of the third-base coaching box swelling her lenses, she waves him around. She would've caught Alice Deal napping if Wayne were built for turns. He trips over the bag and splays in foul territory. From his knees he takes in the whole park: his stepdad, mom, and half-brothers and sisters made it after all, though any look of support was left in Minnesota; home is closer, but the cut-off man is pivoting for the throw to the catcher. Last, Wayne looks at Jenna.

Get the piano off your back! her hands chop.

The shortstop makes the relay home. The catcher blocked the plate with a bored look. As he barrels in, Wayne seems to have decided it's time to check the kid into the nearest infirmary.

Noses crunch; necks snap. Wayne is flat on his back with one hand covering most of the plate. Blood trickles from a gash under his hairline down his nose. The catcher is still in flight and breaches under the backstop.

"Is he in?" the announcer queries off-mike.

In the Oak dugout, one Covalowski signs, *Stud!*

The other signs, *I'd blow him. And I am not one of those guys who thinks gay is cool.*

Willie Chance's grin is malevolent at best.

The umpire finds only air in the catcher's mitt. Blanks tramples the grass between home and the backstop. I come in, stepping around Wayne for what will be the lead. As Tisch streaks around third, I decide I'll hurl the last half.

Willie is safe now. In the on-deck circle, Tisch and I came up with a plan to absolve the coach. I'll say I was down and out, and leading an underdog to the championship was the only offer on the table. Tisch will say that he and I had stayed in touch, and that he would do anything to save his uncle's job; so he'd gotten the help of a C.O.D.A. whom Tisch knew from the school in Texas, who'd successfully faked an audiology report. All Willie will have to do is shake his head and say, "I hadn't seen the Bucks boy in God knows how long. Looked like a Harold to me. Now that I think of it, even as little boys him and Ronnie were always up to somethin'. What a cocked up transcript!"

Tisch scores right about the time that Blanks checks the catcher's other hand. He'd never given up possession of the ball; it is firmly held in his fist.

The plate ump points testily at Wayne and hollers, "You're heh-hee-hyaaa!"

The announcer says, "That's the ball game!"

Bobby Blanks jumps up, rightfully expecting a madhouse he could brag about when he was 60. It's riotous all right but has nothing to do with him or his supporting cast. Hill players buzz around the field and pile on Wayne. The Covalowskis raise him onto their shoulders and carry him around like a king, effectively nipping any Alice Deal victory celebration in the bud.

I'm pleased the moose's gonads finally dropped, but I'm not about to hail another lost championship. I guess I'll never understand these kids. He shoot a look down third at Jenna. She shrugs and rolled her eyes. Then I rolled my eyes and laugh, and Willie laughs, against his entire asthma history, until he cries for air like the first time Aunt Odessa took a piece of his fanny.

The teams shake hands, including the coaches, though it's no secret to anyone how much they despise each other. The Oaks refuse to leave the field, which is fine with the Crusaders, who quietly pack up their shit and leave.

Elaine tailgates.

Goodnight, who'd spent Tisch's at bat and its upshot rocking himself to seasickness, hotfoots after Lou. He says, "Mr. Ellison, please do not run it."

"As they say in the lab, Professor, 'She has escape velocity.'"

"How much will buy her brakes?"

The reporter answers, "Nothing can stop a good story."

Or a good Oldsmobile, unless a bunch of wild-eyed Crusaders let the air out of the tires during their departure. (A few days later, a constable interrupted a chemistry final Goodnight was proctoring to serve papers for a lawsuit charging \$18,000 damage to Alice Deal property.)

Lou Ellison follows Willie's drum. The Oaks curl around the pitcher's mound. Wayne and Jenna break from necking under the backstop to come over (without the threat of a fungo).

Lou takes the team's photo.

Willie gives his closing sermon.

"WITHOUT SOUNDING LIKE JOHNNY HIGH SCHOOL, IT WAS GREAT TO SEE EVERYONE COME OUT OF THE DUGOUT IN SUPPORT OF A TEAMMATE WHEN THE FOOL STARTED THROWING AT US."

Lou and Willie shake hands.

"Sweet-dog, don't drive off a bridge or nothing," Willie says.

Lou gives Willie's shorn head an affectionate squeeze. "That's my baby," he says.

"Knew you were in there all along."

"Maybe we'll hook up. And, talk?" Willie says.

"When you're ready." Lou watches me sweat a simple sign conversation with Tisch, Al, Wayne, and the Covalowskis. He appears ready to say something, but he just shakes his head and goes to his car, chanting, "Bucky, Bucky, Bucky."

So what now? Tisch asks.

I tell him I've perfected a drone so natural that, with this new hair transplantation surgery I've been reading about, a recording contract could be in the works. That's when a hand grabs my shoulder and spins me around.

Al bows out of the way.

Willie had indeed made a call to Coach Rudden at Princeton. He felt this was the least he could do for his former best friend's son. Coach Rudden has been carrying around an NCAA championship ring in his pocket for 3 years. It slides smoothly up my finger.



You stand in place long enough for things to come back in black, white, and read all over. The day after Willie Chance had left prison, you pitched the game of your life against the third-ranked team in the nation. In the first inning, you figured Thunder had stopped on the way for cigars. By the fifth, you guessed Thunder was delayed by an appointment at the flop room. By the seventh, you felt relief for the man sitting in front of Mom and Nikki for not having to deal with cigar ashes when he stretched with the rest of the crowd. After retiring the side in the bottom of the eighth, you took a squirt, gave Justine a never-quit smile, and never returned to the dugout. When you found the bird it was more stunned than wounded, eyes wet and restless, still trying to fly. The dogs had fetched it to Thunder's body by the log fence. The bird and the branch it was on were behind Thunder's head and had been blown off the tree in one piece. The sky was turning pink as you carried the branch deep in the woods, broke it into kindling, and led the dogs to their kennel. You gathered the bird and your father's hunting gloves, laid the gun and shell in a sensible place, and covered your and Willie's tracks. By the time the world discovered your father, it looked like an accident. You had heard that Princeton had advanced

to the College World Series and won out, but at the time you felt this had little to do with you.

Coach Rudden spits sunflower seed shells through his mustache and says, “If you and the university patched things up, I sure wouldn’t be unhappy about you coming back. As long as you don’t start acting like you can’t hear me.”

That would’ve been enough for me, but there was more.

“And would you please stop pulling everything? That ball you tugged foul into those poor people’s swimming pool should’ve gone to right!”

Chapter 39

Sweet Lou Ellison got his byline. Three of them actually. They ate up half a page of the Allentown Morning Call’s sports section:

***Hill Shows Championship Form
Chance Back on Top
LaMar Non-Factor in Heartbreaker***

The original Harold LaMar, an astronomer, thought it funny when he happened to Google himself and the article popped up. He shrugged and went back to work.

Chapter 40

By the last week of the season, Willie had given up on the postcards. Hungry for playoff news, Joltin' Joe Hanks contacted an old Hill teammate, who was one of the seventeen fans who popped in on Hill home games. Joe spent part of the long flight home from the Pacific Rim composing an urgent email to the alumni secretaries of every Hill class.

After the championship, Joe bought himself a seat on the Board. The money paid for dugouts with plumbing, an all-weather bleacher section, new uniforms ("family and friends discount," compliments of Willie's boy, Nunu), and an electronic scoreboard mounted on the side of the barn, which required a few new planks. An inspired shakedown of Joe's hedge fund cronies covered the costs of clearing a patch of pin oaks, ginkgoes, maples, chestnuts, and dowagers beyond center field and constructing a state-of-the-art science laboratory and library.

Still, the baseball program was beset by hardships. The real studs got full rides to universities that provided them with translators. The Hill recruits who came, also went. And at the end of each season when the grass in back of canvas was knee-high, regardless of the team's standing, a player or two had to be dragged out of the student center or library. But on days when the wind was blowing out, and the coach was pushing his men, and occasional woman, to dig for the sublime – on days like that when the coach got all of one because the tears in his eyes and ache in his throat came from muttering, "If Aunt Odessa could see me now," there was a slush fund Professor Robert Goodnight could tap for the occasional, unfortunate shattered window.

Extra Innings

We lose parts of ourselves and find them suddenly in the strangest places.

They were feeling flabby on a crazy night. One of the little ones was taunting the other one on the GameBoy, which of course led to tears, and the baby was howling for a nipple.

He said: Don't look here. It's Thursday night.

She said: That's right it's Thursday night. And Thursday night is your night.

He said: Thursday night is – Monday, Wednesday, aw man. Why don't you take it?

She said: Because it's your night.

He said: I thought you like to feel valued.

She said: I do. On my nights. Thursday night is your night to feel valued.

He said: Remember when Thursday night was date night?

In the last few years, the only mountains she'd seen were in the laundry room, and ever since he wrecked his shoulder and got into enterprise software sales, riproaring cries of delight came only every eight or nine months, when a deal would close. A baseball day? Boiling hot dogs, ketchup and mustard, a long thin cloud almost too high to see, a distant train, chasing the kids through October leaves dropping from the big oak in front, and on trips to grocery stores or hustling to baby showers, occasionally picking up a ground ball or catching a deep fly in the bits and crackles of the radio. These days the only recreation for the adults was the winner-less arguments they found themselves in and the make-up sessions afterward.

She said: Life's too short. I can't spend it fighting. If we died tomorrow, how would you feel?

He said: I wouldn't feel anything. I'd be dead.

She said: The night before. Your last night on earth.

He said: Would I know it's my last night on earth?

She said: What does it matter?

He said: It matters everything. If I don't know I'm dead the next day, who cares?

She said: Okay, you know it's your last night. What would you do, fight with me?

He said: I'd treasure the memories of our life together..

She said: Awww...

He said: ...and...I'd bet on a football game.

She said: What?

He said: If it was football season. And, you could watch, too. And the kids.

She said: Is there a game tonight?

He said: Denver seven over Dallas.

She said: Don't tell me points, just the names.

He said: Broncos vs. Cowboys.

She said: Are the Broncos the orange team?

He said: Yeah.

She said: Take them.

He said: How come?

She said: Orange is better than blue.

He said: How dare you be so sexy? How unfair of you to hog all that beauty?

She said: Who are you looking at?

He said: I love you.

She said: I love you more.

But it was a push.

The End.